



Not the Billionaire

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Description: Will a case of mistaken identity lead to happily ever after or will a well-intentioned charade keep them apart? All women ever want from Sebastian Schultz is his family's money, which is why he's avoided dating like the plague. Then Genevieve Willis walks into the Schultz building, ranting about her meeting with the cold fish head of the company, unaware that's exactly who she's speaking to. Immediately drawn to her beauty and sense of humor, Sebastian can't resist this opportunity to finally get to know a woman without the stigma of the Schultz name. So he introduces himself as Kurtis from the Public Relations department, then implores his playboy younger brother to act as president in his place. Genevieve can't believe her luck landing her dream job, though she's not looking forward to working with Sebastian, whose reputation as being distant and unapproachable precedes him. But she's pleasantly surprised by the warm, welcoming man behind the desk. Yet as they develop an easy rapport and he turns on the charm, she can't stop thinking about Kurtis, the sweet PR guy, who captured her attention just by being himself. As "Kurtis" and Genevieve begin working together on the biggest charity event of the year, will it become impossible for him to conceal his real identity? And will she forgive him when she learns the truth?

Total Pages (Source): 101

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ONE

Good morning, Mr. Schultz.”

Sebastian Schultz strolled through the door of the gift shop, just off the lobby of the Schultz Chocolate building, freshly showered after working out with his personal trainer in the private company gym downstairs. “Good morning, Linda.”

“How was your workout?” she asked.

“Intense, as always.”

Without another word, Linda lifted the plate at the end of the countertop filled with Granny Schultz’s Truffles—the signature item that had started it all. Stopping in the shop for a truffle had been his usual morning routine since he was a kid, and Linda had grown accustomed to it in the twenty-five years she’d been with the company.

Sebastian’s mouth watered as he took one from the outstretched plate and bit into it. His eyes closed as they always did when the smooth chocolate center melted in his mouth. There was not a better truffle. None he’d ever tasted could compare. The flavor was enough to take any mundane day and turn it into something special.

He leaned his elbow on the countertop. “How was your grandson’s Little League game?”

“It was a close one, but they won 5-4.”

“Did he get to pitch again?”

“He did. He’s getting better and better every time.”

“He’ll be pitching in the Majors in no time.”

Linda’s cheeks crinkled up around her eyes as she smiled proudly.

“Any visitors this morning?” he asked, wiping a fleck of chocolate from his lip and licking it off his finger.

“You ask the same question every day for years, even though you know we open at nine.” She pointed to the clock on the wall to her right that read 9:05 a.m.

He chuckled.

Just then, the electronic chime above the door sounded, and in walked a petite blonde woman, glancing from one chocolate display to another with a seriousness that caught his attention.

“Well, there ya go.” Linda tilted her head and smiled. “A visitor.”

Sebastian observed the woman for a few minutes as she moved back and forth across the room, whispering under her breath to herself. He glanced over at Linda, who looked as amused as he was, then back at the woman. She seemed focused on whatever it was she was searching for.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he slowly wandered toward where she stood with a box of chocolates in her hands, intently reading the packaging.

She set the box down and picked up another. Her nose scrunched up, and she shook

her head. “Cherry? Gross!”

“Did you call those gross?” he asked.

The woman startled and placed her hand over her heart. Her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink, and she bit her bottom lip nervously. “Uh ... I’m not a fan of chocolate covered cherries.”

“Have you ever tried a cherry truffle?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“The center is made with real cherry juice from up north in Traverse City.”

Her nose scrunched again. “No thanks.”

“Okay, we’ve established that you don’t like cherry. So, what’s your favorite?” He nodded toward a display of chocolate truffles in various flavors beside them.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had one.”

His mouth fell open, dumbfounded. “Never?”

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“I know it’s probably weird to get a job at a company whose product you’ve never tried, but what can I say? I needed a job and—”

“You work here?”

“I started last week.” Her gaze traveled up to his still damp hair then moved down to take in his T-shirted chest and workout pants, before she glanced around, surveying the shop. “So, you work here then?” She glanced at his casual attire once more.

He laughed a little that she would think he worked in the gift shop, especially dressed as he was. “Yeah, but not here in the—”

“You’re not going to tell anyone what I said about the cherry truffles, are you?”

He leaned in closer and lowered his voice. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Her lips turned up in an adorable smile, causing his heart to stutter in his chest.

“Can I ask you a question about the company?” She picked up a package again and turned it over, angling closer to him and pointing at the picture of Granny Schultz in the upper left corner.

The scent of her enveloped him, and he slowly breathed in hints of vanilla and coconut.

“Is Granny a real person?” she asked.

His brow furrowed. “Excuse me?”

“There are lots of companies out there that have fictionalized stories of how their company was founded and created fake people to establish a certain feeling for their brand, and I wondered if that was the case with Schultz Chocolate. I just want to know what kind of company I’m going to work for.”

He was surprised and intrigued by this woman. “Schultz Chocolate is an honest and ethical company, and I can assure you Granny Schultz was as real as you and me.”

“Oh, she passed away?” she asked.

“Last year, at the age of one-hundred-and-one.” He missed his great grandmother more than words could express. “If you ask around the office, people will tell you what a wonderful, vibrant woman she was. Even in her final days. And she loved dark chocolate cherry truffles.”

The woman let out a little laugh at that. “She sounds very sweet.” Her eyes returned to the package in her hands.

“So, you don’t know the history of Schultz Chocolate then?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Why would I?”

“Because Schultz is a household name. I guess I figured most people would know. Especially someone who works here.”

“Do you know?” she asked.

“Of course.” He didn’t mention that it was his grandfather who had founded the company, or his father who had taken it from its meager beginnings and built it into

an empire, or the fact that he and his siblings ran the business now. He wanted to see how long it took her to figure out who he was.

“So, what department will you be working in?” he asked.

“I’m the new event coordinator for the Schultz Foundation,” she announced proudly.

Sebastian sucked air in between his teeth, which made a whistle. “That’s a big undertaking. Think you’re up to the task?”

She straightened her back, all confidence and resolve, as her eyes narrowed. “I know it’s a big job, but I’ve got plenty of experience, and I’m darn good at what I do.”

Sebastian was distracted by the light brown shade of her eyes with a deeper brown bursting outward from the center, reminding him of melted chocolate.

Dark lashes fluttered as she stared back at him, arms crossed over her chest, and he realized she must have said something while he was getting lost in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Why would you think I wasn’t up to the task? You don’t even know me.”

I’d like to change that. He ignored that sudden thought and replied, “I didn’t mean anything by it. That job is one with a great deal of responsibilities. I don’t think I could handle it. But I have no doubt you’re qualified, otherwise you wouldn’t have been hired.”

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That seemed to please her. “I may have grown up on a farm, but I know how to survive in the corporate world, and I’m really excited to work here, despite the fact I’ve never tried a truffle.” She laughed again, and he was really beginning to love that sound.

“Hold that thought.” Sebastian held one finger up as he rushed off to the counter, returning with a truffle on a small napkin stamped with the Schultz Chocolate logo.

“For you.”

She eyed him, then the truffle, but hesitated. “I really shouldn’t.”

“Of course you should.” He lifted it from the napkin and inched his hand toward her mouth. “It’s not cherry.”

The right side of her mouth tilted upward in a cute sideways smile.

He continued the movement of his hand, and when she opened her mouth, as if to allow him to place it between her full, pink lips, he had the sudden urge to find out what those lips felt like against his.

At the last second, she reached for it and popped it into her mouth, snapping him out of that fantasy. And just as his had done earlier, her eyes slipped closed as she tasted the truffle. “Whoa! This is so good,” she said with her mouth full.

He stared at her, completely enamored, until her pretty brown eyes opened and met his again. They were so rich and so lovely, he nearly forgot to speak.

“I’m glad you like it. We’re very proud of our truffles around here.”

“Do you like working here?” she asked.

“I do.” He glanced around. “I don’t actually work in the gift shop, though.”

“Oh.” She finally set down the package of truffles she’d been holding.

“You’ll like it here. It’s a great company to work for.”

“I’m a little nervous. New job jitters, I guess.”

“That’s normal,” he replied.

“I’m also kind of dreading my first big meeting of the day,” she admitted.

“Why’s that?”

“I have to meet with the president of the company, Sea Bass Schultz himself.”

Sebastian laughed in surprise at her insult of him. “Sea Bass?” He was even more curious about this woman now.

“Yeah, you know, like a cold fish.”

His laughter could not be contained. He really shouldn’t have been laughing at all. This woman had just insulted him to his face, and it was obvious she didn’t know who she was talking to. If she did, then she had some nerve saying what she had.

“I’ve heard he’s difficult to get along with,” she continued. “Kind of distant and unapproachable.”

“Is that so?” He wondered what would come out of her mouth next.

“My friend, Karen, who told me about this job, warned me about him. She said he keeps to himself, shies away from the media, and doesn’t like women.”

He stiffened up at her last comment. It wasn’t that he didn’t like women. He just didn’t like women who pretended to care about him, when they really only cared about his money.

“She also told me he’s a brilliant business man. I guess he’d have to be to succeed with a personality like that. Do you know him?”

“Yeah, I know him.” He knew he should tell her who he was, but she kept talking.

“So, is it true then? Is he as horrible as I’m imagining? Because I’m picturing this stuffy ogre of a man. Give me some advice, so I know what to expect when I go in there.”

Sebastian shook his head. “You might be surprised.” She would be if he didn’t fess up. She’d be embarrassed and uncomfortable after what she’d just said, and their meeting would be awkward. He opened his mouth to tell her who he was, but was interrupted. Again.

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“I wonder if I’ll have trouble getting him to accept my plan for the fundraiser, seeing as he doesn’t like women and all.”

“He likes women.” It came out a little louder than he’d meant it to, but that was the second time she’d said it, and he wanted her to know it was far from the truth. “He just gets a bad rap because he’s a private person and people misinterpret him. In reality, he’s a pretty great guy. You should give him the benefit of the doubt before judging him so harshly based on gossip.”

She shrugged. “You’re probably right.”

“What’s your name?” he asked, dying to put a name with that beautiful face.

“Genevieve.” She extended her hand.

He took her hand in his, squeezing gently as he shook it, savoring the soft feel of her palm against his.

“And you are?” she asked.

The truth was right on the tip of his tongue, but instead of telling her his real name, he heard himself say, “Kurtis.” It wasn’t a total lie. Kurtis was his middle name, after all.

He wasn’t sure why he’d done that, only that she had made it clear what she thought she knew about Sebastian “Sea Bass” Schultz, and for the briefest of moments, he imagined what it might be like to get to know a woman without his family’s name or the rumors about him affecting the way she saw him.

And there was another part of him that didn't want to give another woman a chance to hurt him the way he'd been hurt in the past.

A smile spread across her face, making his heart skip a beat. "Happy to meet you, Kurtis."

"You too, Genevieve." He couldn't hide his smile either as he looked at the stunning creature before him.

She checked her watch. "If I don't go soon, I'll be late for my meeting."

But she hesitated as she looked into his eyes. She seemed torn, like she needed to go, but maybe she didn't want to. Or maybe that was wishful thinking on his part.

"What department are you in?" she asked.

His mind quickly searched for a job that would work closely with fundraising events. "Public Relations."

Her smile returned. "Maybe we'll see each other again."

"You can count on it," he replied.

"Bye," she said.

"Good luck at your meeting."

She looked over her shoulder with a twinkle in her eye. "Thanks for the truffle."

Once she'd left the shop, Sebastian took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. He'd never been so instantly drawn to a woman before.

“She’s a pretty one,” Linda said from her place behind the counter.

“Yeah.” His eyes were still fixed on the door.

Linda chuckled, bringing him out of his trance, and a sudden panic hit him. She was on her way upstairs. To meet with him.

“See ya tomorrow, Linda.” He managed a quick wave over his shoulder and heard Linda laugh as he darted out the door, down the hallway, and around the corner to the private executive elevator. He pressed the “up” button and practically pried the doors open before they even had a chance to part. He pushed the button for the seventh floor then jabbed the button to close the doors several times, even though it didn’t help the doors to close any quicker. Why did it feel like the elevator was moving slower than it ever had before? It seriously had to be going half speed.

When the doors finally opened, he bolted down the hallway, sliding across the freshly waxed tile floor as he made a beeline for his brother’s office.

The door was wide open, and Augustus was seated behind his desk, but instead of looking at his computer, he was on his phone.

“Oh, Gus, thank God you’re here today!” Sebastian exclaimed.

“Thought I should make my weekly appear—”

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He was cut off when Sebastian abruptly raced around his desk, grabbed the back of his desk chair, and began rolling him around the large wooden desk.

“What the—? Bash, what are you doing?”

“We don’t have much time.” Sebastian didn’t explain, he just kept rolling the chair containing his brother.

“For what?” Gus dragged his feet along behind.

Sebastian stopped by the door for a millisecond and peeked into the hallway before continuing their journey across the hall into his own office. “Lift your feet. You’re slowing us down.”

“Explain.” Gus pushed down harder against the floor, the soles of his Tom Ford oxfords scraping along the tile floor.

“In a matter of minutes, a beautiful woman with the prettiest brown eyes I have ever seen is going to come here for a meeting about the upcoming Schultz Foundation fundraiser, and I need you to pretend to be me.”

“Is this a joke?”

“I’ve never been more serious.”

Gus burst out laughing as he lifted his feet, allowing the chair to move fluidly.

Sebastian abandoned his brother just inside the door and scrambled to his desk, yanking his own chair back, and shoving it out of the way.

“Why can’t you just be you?” Gus stared at him.

“Because she thinks Sebastian Schultz is cold and unapproachable.”

“You are cold and unapproachable.”

“Screw you.” Sebastian pushed his brother’s chair again, accidentally knocking Gus’s shin against the leg of the desk.

“Ow!” Gus swung a fist and connected with Sebastian’s upper arm.

“Gah! Sorry!”

When the chair was properly positioned, Gus raised an eyebrow at his brother. “Well, if I’m you, then who are you supposed to be?”

“Nobody. I’m Kurtis from Public Relations.”

Laughter exploded from Gus again as Sebastian rolled his own desk chair behind him into the private bathroom in the corner of the room.

“This seems much more like something I would do,” Gus told him.

“I know.” Sebastian peeked out of the bathroom, his eyes moving back and forth between Gus and the open office door. “I don’t ask you for much, brother, but I need you to do this for me. Please.”

“Fine, but I expect a full explanation.”

“Oh man, thank you. I owe you one.” He closed the door behind him and turned the lock.

“Darn right you do.” Gus’s voice was muffled through the door.

Sebastian moved to stand in front of the mirror. He shook his head at the usually logical man before him. He wasn’t one to come up with schemes like this. He liked to think he was a good, honest, and moral man. But the moment he met Genevieve, all common sense flew out the window.

He still wasn’t sure what had prompted him to lie about his identity. He was happy with who he was most days. But the things she’d said about him touched on his deepest insecurities. He didn’t want to be thought of in the way she’d described him, but he knew that’s how people saw him. And it wasn’t completely untrue. He kept his distance, especially from women, and while he loved his family more than anything, it all stemmed from having the Schultz name.

The intercom on the office desk beeped. “Mr. Schultz, Genevieve Willis is here to see you.”

Genevieve Willis.

His heart jumped in his chest, and he moved closer to the door to listen.

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“Send her in.” Gus’s attempt to sound like him caused Sebastian to snicker.

He heard the click of her heels as she entered the room, and then the two of them exchanged greetings and pleasantries. The sound of Genevieve’s sweet voice on the other side of the door made him smile, and he wished he had some kind of superpower that would allow him to see through walls, because he was dying for another glimpse of her beautiful face.

Part of him felt guilty for the lie and wanted to whip open the door and admit to everything right then and there, but something gave him pause. He’d never had a chance to get to know anyone without the stigma of his billionaire status hanging over the relationship. He wasn’t sure how often their paths would cross, since she worked down the street at the Foundation office, but if he saw her again, and if she didn’t know he was a Schultz, she might actually like him for who he was. Not because he was a billionaire.

TWO

The man seated before Genevieve was not at all what she expected. From what she’d heard, Sebastian Schultz was not an easy person to work with or for. But that was not at all the vibe she was getting from the person she’d just met.

“So, tell me a little more about yourself, Genevieve.” Sebastian ran his fingers through his sandy brown hair and sat back casually, his hazel eyes gazing at her.

“Well, I graduated from Ferris State with a Bachelors in Public Relations. I’ve been working in fundraising for non-profits for the past eight years.”

“If I wanted to know your job qualifications, I would look up your résumé. I mean, tell me more about you.” He winked at her and crossed his arms over his chest.

This was not at all how she saw this meeting going. Sebastian was much more ... flirtatious than she expected. And young. She wasn't positive, but he seemed younger than her. Maybe not even thirty yet. But then she'd never been good at guessing people's ages.

When she didn't answer right away, he said, “What do you like, Genevieve? What makes you tick?”

“I like Schultz Chocolate. I had one of your truffles today, and it was really good.” She sounded like an idiot, sucking up to the boss or something.

“Everyone likes Schultz Chocolate.”

“Not everyone,” she replied.

One of his eyebrows lifted. “No? Who doesn't like them?”

“My sister doesn't like chocolate at all.”

“That's just madness,” he replied, sitting forward and placing his forearms flat on the desk. “Has she tried ours?”

Genevieve wrinkled her nose. “She doesn't like the taste of any chocolate.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “I have never in my life known a person who did not like chocolate.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, now you do.”

“I now feel like it’s my life’s mission to get your sister to like our chocolate.”

“Good luck!” Genevieve laughed. “You can’t make someone change. They have to decide for themselves.”

She thought she saw a shadow cross his face for a moment before he sat back and said, “So, tell me your ideas for the fundraiser.”

Genevieve took a breath, excited to finally share what she’d come up with. “I know in the past, the charity events have been a dinner at different locations around Grand Rapids with people paying for a table, silent auction, those sorts of things, and those are all well and good, but I’d like to expand on that this year.”

He tilted his head toward her. “What ya got?”

“A regatta.”

His eyebrows lifted, and a grin spread across his face. “Interesting.”

“I’m thinking events throughout the day leading up to the race, contests and games that are more family oriented to get the community involved, and a gala at the end of the night for the big spenders, similar to what’s been done before, but with a theme.”

“What kind of theme?” he asked.

“I’ve been kicking around a couple ideas, but I keep going back to the Roaring Twenties.”

Sebastian’s head bobbed with his approval. “I love it.”

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“You do?”

“Absolutely. What about location?”

“The yacht club in Holland.” Being on Lake Michigan and within an hour of Grand Rapids, it was the perfect location.

“Perfect. Let’s put it in motion.”

She hadn’t expected such a high level of enthusiasm. She was excited about it, but considering his reputation, she’d assumed she’d have some convincing to do before he agreed to such a large scale event. This had been much easier than she thought it would be.

Her mind shifted to promoting the event, and she immediately thought of Kurtis. “I’m going to need a lot of help getting the word out about this, especially since I’ve been told the date is already set for late July. That only gives us about six weeks.”

“We have people who can help with that.”

“Perhaps your Public Relations guy, Kurtis.”

A sudden crashing sound came from behind the door in the corner and startled both her and Sebastian.

“Right. Kurtis.” Sebastian looked like he was holding back a laugh as he glanced at the door and back at her.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He looked at her seriously. “Kurtis will be the perfect man for the job. I’ll make sure to put him on it right away.”

“Wonderful.” Genevieve tried not to sound too eager about working with Kurtis, but she couldn’t get his handsome face out of her mind. Those kind eyes. That gorgeous smile. It had taken everything within her to walk out of the gift shop that morning. She had wanted to know more about him. She’d wanted to stay and keep talking. Never before had she believed it when people said they met someone and had an instant connection. Never had she experienced such a thing. Until now.

When their meeting came to an end, Genevieve thanked him and stood.

Sebastian did the same and walked around the desk. “Let me walk you out.” He placed a hand on her lower back and escorted her into the hallway.

She looked over to find him watching her.

“I’m supposed to meet with Holly in Human Resources now to get a tour of the main building.” Being under his gaze made her nervous, and it was the only thing she could think to say.

“After your tour, how about lunch?”

“Lunch?” Is he asking me out?

“A working lunch,” he clarified. “I’d like to hear more about the regatta.”

“Oh, of course. I’d be happy to—”

“And about you.”

She looked over at him again, and he wore a smile that probably made many a girl weak in the knees. He definitely did not fit his rumored reputation. Not at all. He was warm and easy to talk to and very flirtatious. The complete opposite of the Sebastian Schultz she’d been warned about.

“I’ll have my assistant set it up.” He left her at reception and walked back toward his office.

“See you then.” He was already too far down the hallway to hear her reply. She turned her attention to the receptionist, who rolled her eyes in Sebastian’s direction, and she was suddenly curious. “Does he take all the new employees to lunch?” She was pretty sure she knew the answer, but asked it anyway.

The woman chuckled. “If they’re female.”

“He’s different than I thought he’d be,” Genevieve said.

“Don’t worry. He’s not around that much anyway.”

“Why not?” She wanted to hear the answer to that question, but was interrupted by a dark-haired woman who approached them with a cell phone in hand.

Her eyes met Genevieve’s as she hung up the phone. “Good morning, Genevieve. I’m Holly.” She extended a hand to her. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

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Genevieve shook her hand. “Likewise.”

“Let’s give you the tour, shall we?”

THREE

Bash!”

Sebastian slowly opened the bathroom door when he heard Gus’s voice and returned to his office with a sigh of relief. “Thank you for doing that.” He breathed in deeply, feeling lightheaded from holding his breath throughout the meeting. His heart was still beating faster than normal, and now he was feeling a little nauseated as he took a seat at his desk and started up his computer.

Gus stood over him, waiting. “Care to tell me what that was all about ... Kurtis?”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “Okay, I know it was probably stupid, but I met her this morning, and she didn’t seem to know who I was. She was going on about how ‘Sebastian’ is a cold fish who doesn’t like women, so—”

Gus interrupted with a snort.

“When she asked my name, Kurtis popped out of my mouth.”

“Why didn’t you just tell her who you were?”

“There was something different about her, and I wondered what it would be like to

get to know her if she didn't know I had money."

Gus shook his head. "That seems a little backward to me. In my experience, women love guys with money."

"I'm well aware."

"I know you are, but you'll have a much easier time getting her if she knows you're loaded."

"That's just it. I don't want to get a girl that way."

That was one of Gus's biggest problems. He didn't seem to mind women using him for his money. Sebastian could never do that. He wanted a relationship built on love and respect, one that developed naturally, not one motivated by money.

Gus plopped down in a nearby chair. "So, what's your plan?"

"I didn't plan it. It just happened."

"And you think you can keep the truth from her when you work at the same company?"

Sebastian raked his fingers through his dark hair and rested his head in his hands. "Obviously, I haven't thought this through."

"Well, don't worry. I'll keep your secret."

He looked up at his brother. "You're never around here, so that shouldn't be a problem."

“Hey! I’ve been here a lot more lately and you know it,” Gus snapped.

“I know you have.”

“I’m trying, and I think I nailed the meeting with Genevieve.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. “Seriously? You approved her idea without asking her anything but what theme she’d chosen. What about budget? How much will this cost? Is it even feasible to put an event of this size together in six weeks?”

Gus’s shoulders drooped.

“I’m not trying to discourage you, but I think you said yes because it sounded like a great party.”

“The fundraiser could use an update, and I think Genevieve’s idea is just what it needs.” Gus smirked. “And it does sound like a great party.”

Sebastian loved his brother, but he wasn’t always very business-minded. “I’ll deal with the fundraiser from here on out.”

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“Fine.” Gus stood and walked toward the door.

“Thanks again for helping me.”

Gus paused at the door and looked back over his shoulder. “Anything for you, brother.”

FOUR

After finishing the tour and meeting more people than she would actually remember, Genevieve returned to her office down the street at the Schultz Foundation. Getting this job had been the most spontaneous thing she’d ever done. After leaving the non-profit where she’d worked for five years—where she was less than appreciated, despite killing herself with impossibly long hours, and where she’d learned they weren’t completely transparent with where their money went—she’d gotten wind of the available position at Schultz and immediately sent over her résumé. She hadn’t given much thought to the decision, and never actually believed she’d get called for an interview. But she had. And then she’d gotten a second interview, where they had offered her the position.

She’d never felt so happy as the moment she handed in her resignation. Until she walked into her new job and realized there were places of employment that might actually be enjoyable. Not to mention ethically run.

As she started getting organized to tackle the regatta planning, there was a soft knock at the door.

“Hello there.”

Genevieve looked up to see a stunning woman with long chestnut brown hair and pretty doe eyes standing in the doorway. “Hello.”

“I hear we have a new event coordinator.” She held her hand out. “I’m Skylar Schultz.”

“Oh.” Genevieve stood and shook her hand. “Genevieve Willis. It’s so nice to meet you. Are you Sebastian’s ...?”

“Sister.” Skylar filled in the blank. “Please tell me you’ve got something better than dinner and a silent auction for the charity event this year.” Skylar ambled into the room and took a seat in the chair across the desk from Genevieve.

Genevieve liked how candid Skylar was. “I think I do, actually.”

Skylar scooted forward a little in her chair as if she were hanging on Genevieve’s every word. “Do tell.”

“A regatta.”

“I like that.” Skylar’s head bobbed a few times. “Who doesn’t like hunky sailors racing across the big lake?”

Genevieve almost laughed aloud. Skylar seemed very laid back. Everyone that worked here did. It was a nice change.

“I met with Sebastian this morning, and he already approved the idea.”

“That’s good to hear. He’s not always receptive to change.”

“Honestly, he was much different than I expected,” Genevieve admitted.

Skylar cocked her head. “How so?”

“I mean absolutely no offense when I say this, but I had heard he was kind of ... difficult to work with.” Genevieve hoped she hadn’t crossed the line by telling her that.

Skylar started laughing. “He can take a little time to get to know, but he’s a big softy, really.”

“I thought he was nice and easy to talk to and funny. We got on very well.”

Skylar’s brow furrowed. “I’ve never heard anyone refer to Sebastian as funny before.”

Genevieve shrugged. “I was pleasantly surprised.”

“I’m glad.” She tapped the desk lightly with her palm and stood. “Well, I’ll let you get back to it. You have a regatta to plan, right?”

“Right.” The excitement over this event was growing with each enthusiastic reception.

“Nice meeting you, Genevieve.”

“You too, Miss Schultz.”

“Call me Sky,” she insisted.

“Okay, Sky.”

As Skylar neared the door, a familiar and very handsome face stepped into the doorway.

“Kurtis!”

FIVE

Sebastian had been distracted all morning. He’d sat at his desk and spent the last hour toying with the idea of heading down the street to Genevieve’s office to invite her to lunch. That smile of hers overshadowed all other thoughts and made it impossible for him to get any work done. He finally caved and took one of the company golf carts to get between buildings quickly. What he hadn’t expected when he arrived at her office was to run smack dab into his sister.

“Kurtis!” Genevieve sounded excited to see him, which made his heart soar.

Skylar’s eyebrow raised as her eyes met his. “Kurtis?”

“Good afternoon, Miss Schultz.” His voice squeaked a little, and his eyes locked with his sister’s, willing her to play along.

“Miss Schultz?” Her head tilted in amusement as Sebastian moved into the room. “So, you two have met.” She looked back and forth between the two of them.

Genevieve nodded. “Kurtis was the first person I met this morning down in the gift shop.”

“Was he?” Skylar looked pleased, as if she was racking up all the favors he was going to owe her after this. She patted him on the arm. “That’s our Kurtis. Such a friendly and welcoming guy.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said pointedly.

Her eyes narrowed at him calling her ma’am. “Now, Kurtis, you know I’ve told you again and again to call me Sky.”

“Sorry, Sky.”

“Can I call you Kurt?” she asked teasingly, obviously attempting to hold in the laughter.

“I prefer Kurtis.”

“Well, that is your name.” She eyed him. “Isn’t it?” She moved past him, and he turned his back to Genevieve and gave his sister a piercing look before she walked out into the hallway.

“I’ll be right back,” he told Genevieve.

He did his best to look calm as he walked out the door, even though he felt nothing of the sort.

“Sky,” he whisper-shouted after her.

She slowed her steps so he could catch up. “What are you doing, Bash?” she asked

quietly.

He caught her up on all that had happened that morning. “Do you know how long it’s been since I really got to know someone, since someone got to know me, without the Schultz name getting in the way?”

“Sebastian.” Her voice held a warning.

“Never, Sky. Never.”

She looked down, sadly.

“She’s different. I can just tell. But I need to be sure she’s for real ... before I tell her who I am.”

“Oh, Bash.” She squeezed his arm. “I understand what you’re saying, and I know what you’ve been through, but I don’t think lying to her about who you are is the right way to go about it.”

He hung his head a little. “It just happened. I promise I won’t let it go on for too long.”

Skylar shook her head. “This is so not like you.”

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“I thought I was fine with being single, until she walked through that door. And then when she opened her mouth and started to speak, I found myself wanting to know more about her, wanting to hear every thought in her head. I’ve never felt like this before. Not even with ... well, you know.”

Skylar nodded, and he knew she understood. Just the thought of her still made his blood boil.

“I know.”

“So, will you keep my secret for now?” he practically begged.

“All right.”

“Sky, thank you.” He pulled her in for a hug, knowing she was reluctant about this.

“But if she straight up asks me, I’m not going to lie to her, Bash.”

“Okay. Understood. It won’t come to that.”

“I hope you’re right.” She rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe you talked me into this.”

“Thank you,” he mouthed as he moved toward the office again.

She walked away, shaking her head.

Sebastian breathed a sigh of relief. With both of his siblings on his side, this could

work.

He glanced down the empty hallway and entered her office again. She was standing beside her desk now, jotting something on a notepad.

“Sorry about that. I had to ask her a couple things. New product launch.”

Genevieve gave him her attention as she set her notepad down. “What are you doing here? Did Sebastian send you to work on the regatta?”

“The regatta? No, but he did mention it to me.”

“Oh, good. I’m excited to start working on it.”

“So am I.” He stepped closer. “But I actually stopped by to ask if you’d like to go to lunch.”

“Oh.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “That sounds really nice, but I already made lunch plans.”

“You did?” He tried not to let his voice betray how upset that made him. “With whom?”

“A working lunch with Sebastian.”

“Traitor,” he grumbled under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Uh, maybe tomorrow then.”

Her smile melted his heart. “I’d like that.”

“Okay, good. I’ll see you later then.”

She gave him a cute wave as he walked out of the office and headed straight for the exit.

I’m going to kill my brother.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Sebastian burst into Gus’s office.

Gus set his phone down. “Pretending to work.”

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“You’re taking her to lunch?”

A smirk crossed Gus’s face. “Working lunch, brother.”

“Why didn’t you mention this earlier?”

“What’s the big deal? I just want to see what all the fuss is about. If you’re willing to change your identity for this girl, there must be something special about her. And I have to make sure she’s good enough for my big brother.”

Sebastian scowled. “That’s not why.”

“Sure it is.”

He set his eyes on Gus, waiting for him to admit what he already knew.

“Fine. She’s gorgeous.”

“Hands off,” Sebastian warned.

“It’s lunch, Bash. You think I’m going to seduce her in the middle of Cygnus?”

Sebastian’s stomach dropped at his mention of seduction. “I like this girl, Gus.”

“You like a lot of girls.”

His forehead scrunched up. “No, I don’t. But maybe you’re too wrapped up in your

own life to notice anyone but yourself.”

“Harsh, Sebastian.”

“Truth hurts, Augustus.”

Gus narrowed his eyes at his brother. “Despite your less than kind comments, I love you, brother. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t think twice about wining and dining the lovely Genevieve.”

The sound that came out of Sebastian’s mouth was nearly a growl.

“I can’t promise she won’t fall in love with me, but I won’t try anything with her.” He held his palm open to Sebastian, revealing the tiny scar from their silly blood brothers ritual when they were kids—cutting a small slit until they drew blood, then clasping hands so their blood blended together.

Sebastian held his hand open showing his identical scar.

They clasped hands and squeezed as they had back then, only without the blood dripping, and pulled each other in for a hug and a pat on the back.

“Bros before—”

“Don’t finish that,” Sebastian scolded his sometimes crass brother.

Gus cracked up laughing.

“I expect you to report back on everything you talk about, especially relating to the fundraiser.”

“Have I mentioned this is a crazy, messed up scheme you’ve got going?”

Sebastian sighed. “I know, okay.”

“I approve.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “Of course you do.”

SIX

Genevieve felt out of her element, sitting across from Sebastian Schultz, dining at one of the nicest restaurants in town. The fanciest place she’d ever eaten was Charley’s Crab before her high school prom, but that felt a little more casual than Cygnus 27 in the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, where they were currently seated, looking out over the Grand Rapids skyline and the Grand River below.

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“What’s good here?” she asked.

“What isn’t?” The waiter arrived just as Sebastian replied, bringing several plates. “I hope you don’t mind. I ordered ahead for us.”

“Oh, all right.” She did mind, actually, and she had the urge to tell him so, but she kept it to herself. He was probably used to people doing whatever he told them to do, and he was her new boss, so she politely accepted the food from the waiter—a juicy filet mignon with whipped potatoes. Neither of the items on her plate were what she would have chosen for herself. She had always been the kind of girl who put on pounds easily, something her mother was quick to point out, and she’d worked hard to keep them off. Over the years, she’d come to learn that she felt her best when she ate poultry or fish and plenty of vegetables and steered clear of red meat and starchy foods like potatoes. But she wasn’t going to tell Sebastian that.

“So, tell me, Genevieve ...” He took a bite of his steak, letting out a satisfied groan. “Where are you from?”

“I’m from Nashville,” she answered. “Michigan, not Tennessee.”

“Where’s that?” he asked.

“About an hour south of here. How about you? Have you always lived in Grand Rapids?”

“I was born right up the street, but I haven’t always lived here. I spent a good part of my early twenties in California.”

“What was in California?”

“The beach and girls,” he replied with a laugh.

“I see. So you haven’t always worked for your family’s company then?”

“I had to figure out who I was first.”

“And did you?” She fixed her stare on him, and a strange look crossed his face. Had her question made him uncomfortable?

“Jury’s still out on that one.” The expression on his face changed in an instant, and he smiled at her. “Do you know who you are?”

“I think so,” she answered. “Most days anyway.”

He nodded as if he understood.

Genevieve chose that moment to taste the potatoes, which were delectable, melting on her tongue. “Oh my word,” she breathed.

He looked up at her. “Is something wrong with your food? We can send it back.” He scanned the room as if looking for a waiter.

“No, the opposite, actually. I’ve never had such delicious mashed potatoes.”

He grinned. “I told you. Everything’s good here.”

She took one more scoop. “Mmmm.”

He chuckled. “What do you like to do most?”

“On the job?” she asked.

“In your free time.”

Genevieve snuck another tiny bite of the potatoes. “What free time? Work is my life.”

“You don’t have to say that. I already believe you’re committed to your job.”

“I’m not just saying that. My last job had me working long hours. I was in charge of all the charity events and a lot of the behind-the-scenes tasks because they were low on staff. I can’t tell you the last time I went out to a restaurant—even for a work-related lunch.”

Sebastian sat back and shook his head. “That’s unacceptable. And I can promise you that will not happen while you’re working for me. Everyone who works at Schultz is like family.”

Genevieve nodded. “I’m getting that impression. I met your sister this morning, and she was so nice and easy to talk to.”

“That’s Sky. She likes to meet all the new employees and get to know everyone. Our dad always had all of us hanging out in the factory when we were young, chatting up the workers.”

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“That’s sweet.” She thought about what he’d said. “All of you? Do you have other siblings?”

“A brother, Augustus.”

“Good to know. Will I meet him soon?”

“Uh, probably not. He’s not around the office much these days.” He leaned closer and smirked. “He’s sort of the black sheep of the family.”

“I see.”

“But we don’t need to talk about him. I’d like to hear all your ideas for the regatta. It sounds amazing.”

A little blush colored her cheeks. “Thank you. When I was thinking about this event, I tried to come up with something different. Regattas are fun to watch, and I think having all the events during the day rather than only a dinner and silent auction will make it a huge success.”

“You had me at different.”

She laughed and continued to share more detailed ideas for some of the contests and events throughout the day. Sebastian seemed to hang on her every word, listening intently, never interrupting. She noticed, though, that he went through several glasses of wine. When she was finished, he raised his hand to the waiter, who came to clear away their plates. She felt bad that most of hers had gone untouched, but he didn’t

seem bothered.

“It all sounds perfect. And I have no doubt you’ll make this a year to remember.” He reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

She smiled nervously. “Thank you, Mr. Schultz.”

He took his hand away and shook his head. “Call me Gu—bastian.”

She made a face. “Gubastian?”

“Pardon my misspeak.”

She almost laughed, but considering how much he’d had to drink, she decided against it. “You’re pardoned ... Sebastian.”

He had an indecipherable expression on his face as he stood and walked around behind her to push her chair in when she stood.

As they walked to the door, he laid a hand on her lower back to guide her out. He sure did seem touchy. She definitely found Sebastian attractive, and he seemed to like her well enough, but she got the impression that he’d taken a lot of the female employees to lunch. Not that she would ever consider dating her boss.

She wondered if the company had policies about dating a coworker, and she thought about Kurtis and smiled to herself. Those warm hazel eyes of his, his hair as deep brown as the dark chocolate truffle she’d eaten that morning, that neatly trimmed facial hair that had her fingers twitching to touch it. He’d changed out of his workout clothes and into a suit by the time he’d come to her office to invite her to lunch, and he looked more handsome than any man should be allowed to look. How could she be expected to get any work done with Kurtis around?

She wondered, though, if he was already involved with someone at the company. She'd wandered over to the door when Kurtis and Skylar had walked down the hallway outside her office earlier, and she'd seen them hug. It had disappointed her, but she didn't let on that she'd seen.

The same dark car that had driven them to lunch pulled up out front and Sebastian opened the door for her. She climbed in and greeted the driver. "Hello again."

"Hello, miss." The man looked over his shoulder at her and smiled.

Sebastian climbed in next to her, and the car sped off in the direction of Schultz Chocolate.

"Thank you for lunch," she told him.

He leaned in a little closer, and she could smell the alcohol on his breath. "If you had to choose between spending your life with a rich man or a poor man, which would you choose?"

She was amused, but also wondering if this was the drink talking. "Is this a proposal?"

He laughed a little too loudly. "I'm just getting to know you, Genevieve."

"It wouldn't matter to me ... if I was in love with him."

"Did you know lack of money is one of the top reasons for divorce?" he asked.

"Makes sense. Money can be a stressful topic. It's hard enough dealing with finances when you're single."

“And you’d still choose a poor man for love?”

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“Absolutely.” Her mind returned to Kurtis again.

“Good thing you won’t have to.”

“What does that mean?”

He shook his head as he rubbed his palm down his face. “Nothing.”

Genevieve didn’t know what that was all about, but his line of questioning seemed a little too personal. She was relieved when the car pulled up to the main Schultz Chocolate office.

“Oh, I work at the Foundation. Can you drop me there instead?” She directed her question at the driver.

“I have a surprise for you first,” Sebastian announced.

Genevieve was confused as Sebastian led her down a long hallway on the fifth floor, where marketing and public relations was located. They passed by several offices, rounded a corner, and he opened a door to reveal an office space four times the size of her office at the Foundation. Her eyes took in the large wooden desk in front of a giant leather chair, then turned to the wall of windows looking out over the city. She walked quickly to the window and stared out at the Grand River below.

“This is amazing.”

“It’s yours.”

Her head whipped around to look at him. “What? Are you serious?”

“So, you like it?”

She felt suddenly overwhelmed. Her hand lifted to lay over her heart as she fought back unexpected tears. Don’t cry in front of the boss.

“Are you okay?” He moved closer, and his voice softened and filled with concern.

She bobbed her head up and down. “More than okay.”

“Good.” He tenderly touched her shoulder and smiled at her again.

“But I already have an office at the Foundation. Why would I need an office here?”

“The former head of marketing resigned last week, so this office is newly available. It makes sense for you to be here since you’ll be working closely with us on the regatta.”

“Us?”

“I’m inspired by your vision for this event. If you need me, I’m only an elevator ride away.”

“I appreciate that.” She took a seat at the desk and smiled contentedly.

A smile spread across Sebastian’s face as well.

“Where’s Kurtis’s office?” she asked.

“Kurtis?” The smile left his face. “Oh, right. Kurtis.”

“I’d like to talk to him and start working on a plan to get the word out as soon as possible.”

“I’ll let him know.” Sebastian seemed irritated as he walked out the door and down the hallway.

“Sebastian!” she called out.

He poked his head back into the room. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

He flashed her a killer smile before leaving again.

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She didn't know what she'd done to deserve an office like this. When she'd walked through the doors for her meeting this morning, she couldn't have imagined she'd end up here. But she wasn't complaining. Not at all. It was a dream come true after what she'd put up with at her former employer.

Meeting Sebastian Schultz had definitely been interesting, and she was happy to discover that Kurtis was right. Sebastian was a pretty great guy. And the rumors about him were wrong. Definitely not a cold fish. He was friendly and thoughtful, and he seemed to like women just fine. Maybe a little too much.

She leaned back in her comfortable leather chair, rotated toward the window, and looked out at the river below. "This will do."

SEVEN

"What is with that girl?" Gus came through Sebastian's office door and plopped down in the chair opposite his brother.

Sebastian looked at Gus curiously. "Genevieve? What happened?" He'd been nervous at the idea of his brother having lunch with her. Gus was charming and handsome, always a hit with the ladies. He had no trouble getting women to fall for him, especially when he spread his wealth around.

"She seems completely unimpressed with everything I do and say."

Sebastian laughed. "Good for her."

Gus's eyebrow raised. "You know how much I love a challenge, right?"

The blood in Sebastian's veins began to boil at the thought. "You said you wouldn't go after her."

"She intrigues me."

"Gus!"

"She did like the office, though."

"The office?"

"I gave her the big office on the fifth floor."

"You did what?"

"I thought she'd be impressed." He got a little twinkle in his eye. "And she was. She started crying and everything."

"You made her cry?"

"They were happy tears, bro."

"You know it's going to be harder for me to keep my identity secret with her in the same building, right?"

"I wasn't thinking about that."

"Yeah, I know. You were thinking about what you could do to get her." It was Gus's M.O. Use his wealth and status to get them into bed. And it almost always worked.

“I can see why you like her. It’s not just her looks. She’s smart and serious. Just your type.”

“I know.” Sebastian was losing patience.

Gus stood and sat on the edge of the desk. “Maybe she could be my type too.”

Sebastian looked around for something to smack his brother with, then shoved Gus off the edge instead.

Gus landed on the floor with a thud. “Not cool.”

Sebastian stared down at Gus. “Have you been drinking?”

“I was wining and dining.”

“Come on, Gus. I thought you were putting that behind you.”

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“I only had a couple glasses with my steak.”

Sebastian kept his gaze on his brother.

“I can’t believe you really think I’d go after the first girl you’ve shown any interest in in years.” It wasn’t unlike Gus to steer the conversation away from his drinking.

Sebastian shrugged his shoulders. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Hey, that was years ago, and Macy only wanted one thing out of your relationship.”

“My bank account remembers well.”

“I did you a favor there. She was good for a little fun, but not the girl for you.”

It was the same with most girls Sebastian attempted to date over the years. At first, they seemed genuinely interested, acting like they actually wanted to get to know him, but as the relationships progressed, the topics of conversation often turned to buying this or that, going to fancy restaurants, taking the limo or the private jet on trips. It was never about their future, only about what he could give them or buy them. He’d only had one serious dating relationship in his life—Serena—but in the end, that had turned out to be a lie too.

When he’d sworn off dating, the fact that he might always be alone saddened him, but he’d gotten used to it over time. He had a family who loved him, and while at times he longed to be close to a woman, he was mostly happy with his life.

But now that he'd met Genevieve, the longing to connect on a deeper level was overwhelming. And the possible threat of his brother swooping in drove him crazy.

He almost laughed aloud thinking about wanting an honest relationship with her when he'd started theirs off with a lie. Kurtis? What had he been thinking? Why hadn't he just told her who he was? She might have been embarrassed at first for insulting him unknowingly, but they could have moved past that awkwardness and at least she would have known who he really was.

But then he thought again about how relaxed and open she was with him. There were no barriers because of status, and that had felt amazing. It had reaffirmed in his mind that this was the right choice for now. At least until he knew if this could actually go somewhere.

"Hello." Gus waved his hand in front of Sebastian's face. "Are you in there?"

"Huh?"

"Gosh, I've never seen you so moony over a girl before."

"Shut it."

"You'll be happy to know that she's single. At least I think she is. She mentioned money being hard to deal with when you're single."

"Why were you talking about money?"

"I asked if she would rather marry a rich man or a poor man."

"What?" He was so exasperated with his brother at times.

“I was trying to gauge her feelings about guys with money.”

“And that question was going to give you your answer?”

“She said it didn’t matter to her. That she’d choose a poor man if she was in love with him. And she thinks you’re poor, so ... go and fall in love.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“It didn’t matter how impressed she was with that office, she clearly wasn’t impressed with me. She only asked about you ... or should I say ‘Kurtis’.”

“She asked about me?”

Gus smirked. “Just go.”

“I already stopped by her office once today. I don’t want to seem too eager.”

Gus rolled his eyes. “She’s off and running already. You should’ve heard her talk about this event. The wheels are turning, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s already set up meetings.”

Sebastian shook his head and smiled. “She’s so incredible.”

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“Go!” Gus waved his arms, shoos him out of his own office.

“Have I ever told you how pushy you are?” Sebastian said.

“You love me.”

Nerves fluttered through Sebastian as he walked out of the fifth floor elevator. Partly because he was anxious to see Genevieve again, but also because he was nervous that someone would greet him by his name and ruin everything.

Sebastian moved swiftly toward the office at the end of the hallway. He took a deep breath as he knocked on the door.

“Come in,” her sweet voice rang out.

He opened the door to see her scribbling something on her notepad. “Settling in okay?”

Her eyes shot up to his and that beautiful smile spread across her face. “You’re just everywhere today, aren’t you?”

“Is that a complaint?”

“Not at all. Come in.”

Sebastian moved into the room, closed the door behind him, and sat on the edge of her desk. “How was lunch?”

“It went well. Mr. Schultz seemed very impressed with my ideas.”

Sebastian glanced around the spacious office. “Obviously.”

A shy expression crossed her face. “It’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

He shook his head. “It suits you.”

She looked up at him with a smile in her eyes. “You think?”

“I do.”

“Well, there’s plenty of room in here if you want to come help me get started on the regatta.” She gave him a coy look, which made his pulse quicken.

He suddenly realized that he’d been so distracted by the idea of his brother being interested in Genevieve that he’d forgotten to ask what they’d discussed at the restaurant. “He approved all your plans then?”

“He did. It’s going to be amazing.”

Sebastian wished he shared her enthusiasm, but he was annoyed with Gus for making decisions without running them by him first. He’d asked his brother to take over for one meeting, and he’d made it very clear that he was taking back the reins on this event.

“So, it was a good lunch then.” He tried to sound supportive.

“Yeah, but the meal itself ...” She wrinkled her nose, which was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen.

“Not good? Cygnus has some of the best food in town.”

“I don’t eat red meat very often, and he ordered us steak.”

“You don’t eat red meat?”

“I stick to salmon or chicken, usually. A girl’s gotta watch her figure, right?”

Sebastian snorted, but with a slight blush to her cheeks, he could tell she was serious, and he couldn’t figure out why in the world she would need to watch her weight. She was beautiful just as she was.

“Anyway, how did you know we went to Cygnus?”

His heartbeat stuttered. Crap. “Someone in the office said.”

“Oh. Have you ever been?”

“Once or twice.” Truthfully, he’d been more times than he could count. “Their steak is very good.”

She grinned. “I would’ve liked to have made my own lunch choice, but when the boss orders for you, what’re you gonna do, right?”

It annoyed him that Gus had done that, but that’s how he usually was with women, and they usually didn’t mind him being all alpha male with them. Sebastian, on the other hand, was often awkward about how much money they had and how to spend it on people he cared about without coming off as pretentious. He wanted nothing more than to be like their father, Ephraim, who may have built their company into a chocolate empire and made them billions of dollars, but never once treated anyone as if they were less than and never flaunted the money they had. He was down-to-earth and good, generous and caring, and that’s exactly what Sebastian strived to be.

“Speaking of the boss ...” he said. “Mr. Schultz wants us to work closely to plan and promote this, and I’ll help you in any way I can.”

“Really?” An adorable smile spread across her face.

He nodded. “What can I do?”

“Will you go with me to Holland tomorrow to meet with the coordinator at the yacht club?”

“Absolutely.” Nothing had ever sounded more wonderful in his life.

EIGHT

I’M FREE!”

Genevieve emerged from her kitchen later that night to see her sister, Rhonda, drop her purse on the side table by the door and raise her hands in the air as she did a little dance.

“The divorce is final!”

“Oh, Rhon, I’m so happy for you.” Genevieve walked over and hugged her tightly.

“It’s done, and I can finally move on with my life.” Rhonda gave her a hard squeeze before letting go. “How was your day?”

A smile spread across Genevieve’s face before she could control it. “It was good.”

“What was that?” Rhonda gave her a curious look as she tucked a blonde wave behind her ear.

“What?”

“That smile.”

“It was just a smile.” Genevieve ignored her older sister and walked back into the kitchen, opening the fridge to pull out a couple containers with leftover grilled chicken and steamed vegetables.

Rhonda trailed after her. “Oh no, you can’t get all dreamy-eyed all of the sudden and

then pretend it was nothing.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Tell me about your new boss, Richie Rich. Was it love at first sight for both of you and now he’s going to marry you and provide for our family for the rest of our lives?”

“Have you been reading Jane Austen again?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t the families all live together in the same house in those books? You really want to live with Mom again?”

“If we had billions of dollars, heck yeah.”

Genevieve pushed her to the side with a bump of the hip. “You’re so shallow.”

“So, is he the reason for your smile?”

“What? No, I did not fall in love with my boss.” She pulled two plates from the cupboard and set them on the countertop, popping open the plastic containers. She could feel her sister’s eyes on her. “Fine. I met someone.”

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Rhonda clapped her hands together and shrieked, causing Genevieve to jump and nearly knock one of the containers of leftovers onto the floor.

“Geez, Rhonda.”

Rhonda took both containers from her and reattached the lids.

“What are you doing? That’s our dinner.”

“Not tonight, it’s not.” Rhonda put the food back into the fridge. “We’re going out. I’ve got something to celebrate. And it sounds like you do too.”

Genevieve grinned as her sister led her to the bathroom and opened the cabinet, which contained what little makeup she owned.

“Now, start talking. I want to hear everything.”

“His name is Kurtis.”

“Kurtis! I love it. And?”

“That’s it. I just met him.”

“I need more ...” Rhonda’s face screwed up as she opened a compact of crumbled eyeshadow. “How old is this?”

Genevieve laughed. “I don’t know. I stole it from you in high school.”

“Gross, Genny,” she responded as she tossed it into the garbage can. “You’re supposed to replace your eyeshadow every year or two.”

“Oops.”

Rhonda headed out to the other room and returned with her purse, dumping the contents onto the bathroom vanity and retrieving her own eyeshadow palette. “Tell me about Kurtis. What do you like about him?”

Genevieve thought about that for a moment. What’s not to like? “He’s really sweet and so easy to talk to.”

“Easy to talk to?” she raised an eyebrow. “Come on. Give me all the details.”

“He has dark hair and these amazing hazel eyes. I could stare into them all day.”

“That’s more like it. What else?”

“He’s got a nice smile.” She felt a blush coming on just remembering him smiling at her.

“Is he buff?”

“You are so obsessed with muscles.”

“I know, right? So ... does he have any?”

“I mean, when I met him, he was in a T-shirt and workout pants, and he looked ... pretty fit, I guess. But I didn’t gawk at his muscles or anything.” She waved her sister off. “I don’t even care about that.”

“You will.”

She shook her head. “You’re crazy.”

“You’re gonna want a guy who can pick you up and carry you to bed.”

“Rhonda!”

“Or push you up against the wall.”

“Okay, we’re done here.”

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Rhonda started laughing as she applied mascara. She was so inappropriate sometimes. But after a long separation from her husband of ten years, it was understandable that she would be a little starved for affection, which was probably why she clung to every detail of Genevieve's dating life and talked about guys as if they were a piece of meat.

"So, are you in the same department or what?" Rhonda asked.

"Yeah, they actually moved me from this tiny little cubby of an office to this amazing office in the marketing department."

"Well, aren't you special."

"They just treat their employees well, I guess. It's a nice change from my last job."

"I'll say."

"You should see this office, though. It's gigantic, and the view of the river is beautiful." Happiness settled over her when she thought about it.

"So, you'll see Kurtis again tomorrow then?" Of course, her sister would turn the conversation back to the guy.

"We're working together on my first big fundraising event."

Rhonda turned the curling iron on to heat it up. "How convenient."

Genevieve watched her sister applying makeup expertly, but her mind wasn't on what color eyeshadow to wear. When she'd been hired, she thought life couldn't get any better, but meeting Kurtis ... this was much more than she expected. She didn't want to get ahead of herself, but there was definitely something between them, a special kind of connection she'd never felt with a guy before.

"You can borrow some of my makeup if you want," Rhonda told her.

Growing up, Genevieve had wanted to be just like her sister—beautiful, tall and thin, never had to worry about her weight, always had boyfriends and dates. Genevieve was the exact opposite—always in jeans and T-shirts, messy braids, no makeup. She was the simple sister with the tomboy proclivities.

Looking at her reflection now, she was happy with who she was, but it had taken her years to get there after being told by their mother throughout her formative years that she could use some improvement.

She glanced over at Rhonda, who looked happier than she'd seen her in a long time. She'd become an entirely different person within the confines of her marriage to Nolan, a miserable shell of herself, and Genevieve was overjoyed to have her sister back. She deserved a man who would adore her, not one who was verbally abusive and unfaithful.

"You look beautiful," Genevieve told her.

"Thanks." Rhonda stepped closer and ran a brush through Genevieve's hair. It had been years since she'd done that. "Are you ready?"

Genevieve nodded. "Let's go."

The girls headed out to a little club on the east side of Grand Rapids. The place was

hopping, and they were lucky to find an empty table. A local band was performing, so it was a little hard to hear. They ordered some greasy fries and soft drinks and settled in to enjoy the music.

Genevieve scanned the room, taking in the people closer to the stage who were dancing to the music. She turned in the direction of the pool table when she heard laughter, and there, standing with a group of people, was Sebastian Schultz.

“Oh my gosh!” She quickly rotated so her back was to him. “That’s my boss.”

Rhonda craned her neck to see. “Your boss is here? Which one is he?”

She glanced over her shoulder in his direction again and saw that a curvy blonde had wrapped her arms around his neck and was leaning in to whisper in his ear. “He’s the one with the blonde draped all over him.”

“Yum! Don’t you have all the luck. I wish my boss looked like that.”

Genevieve turned her head once more, and this time, Sebastian’s gaze met hers, and his eyebrows raised when he recognized her. He said something to the woman beside him and began moving in their direction.

She turned back to Rhonda and groaned. “I think he’s coming over.”

“Hey, Genevieve,” he said as he arrived at their table.

“Sebastian.” She gave him a little smile. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Just playing a little pool with friends.” He turned his attention to Rhonda and held out his hand. “Hi, I’m Sebastian.”

“This is my sister, Rhonda.”

“Ah, the chocolate hater.”

Rhonda’s eyes narrowed at Genevieve. “You told him that?”

Sebastian pointed to the empty seat between them. “May I?”

Both girls nodded, and he turned the chair around and straddled it.

“What brings you ladies out tonight?”

“We’re celebrating!” Rhonda replied.

“Is it your birthday?” he asked her.

“My divorce was finalized today.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No apologies necessary. I’ve been waiting for this for a very long time.”

“Well, then let me buy you a drink.” He signaled for a waitress. “What’ll you have?”

“Sex on the Beach.”

“Rhonda.” Genevieve gave her a look.

“It’s a drink.”

“I know that.” She didn’t. She wasn’t exactly in the habit of hanging out at places like this, but she was there for her sister.

“And for you?” he asked Genevieve.

“I’m fine.” She pointed at her Coke as she took a bite of a french fry.

He ordered Rhonda’s drink and a beer for himself.

“So, tell me, Rhonda. What is it about chocolate that repulses you so?”

Rhonda laughed. “I’ve never cared for it. And believe me, I’ve tried to like it, but something about the flavor doesn’t sit right with me. If forced, I can handle a tiny bit of white chocolate, but that’s about it.”

“Interesting. You’re the first person I’ve ever met who doesn’t like chocolate.”

“I’m sure I won’t be the last.”

“Seeing as chocolate is our life’s work, I hope you’re the one and only.”

The waitress dropped their drinks off at the table then.

“So, I never expected to see you in a place like this.” He shifted his attention to Genevieve as he spoke.

“Why not?”

“Just doesn’t seem like your style.”

“Because you know me so well,” she said with a teasing smirk.

“I like to think I’m pretty good at reading people.”

“Is that so? Tell me more.”

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“Well, you’re a little too buttoned up for this place.” His gaze settled on her pink floral blouse, which was literally buttoned all the way to the top, before he turned his eyes on Rhonda. “Your sister, on the other hand, is properly dressed for a bar.”

“Should I be offended by that?” Rhonda didn’t seem the least bit offended.

He shook his head as he took in her gauzy spaghetti strap tank top and short jean skirt. “Not at all. You look hot.”

Genevieve thought she saw a little blush spread over Rhonda’s cheeks, but she couldn’t be sure in the low light. She wasn’t sure how she felt about her boss flirting with her sister.

“Okay, you may be right.” Genevieve interrupted the looks Sebastian and Rhonda were giving each other. “This isn’t exactly my idea of a good time, but I’m here to support my sister.”

Rhonda smiled over at her, then looked at Sebastian again. “This divorce has been years in the making. My ex ... wasn’t very nice to me.”

“Did he hit you?” Sebastian asked with concern.

“Nothing like that,” Rhonda replied.

“He used his words rather than his fists,” Genevieve interjected, “but it was just as damaging.”

Sebastian reached over and touched Rhonda's hand. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

"Thanks. But it's over now, and I'm so ready to get back out there." She lay a hand on top of his.

"How about a dance?" he offered.

"I'd love that."

"No!" Genevieve spoke over her.

Two sets of eyes stared at her.

"Why not?" her sister asked.

She looked at Rhonda, then at Sebastian. "It's weird. You're my boss."

"It's just one dance," he said as he stood.

"Yeah, Genny. It's not like we're running off together." She stood and took Sebastian's hand, then leaned in to his side flirtatiously. "Or are we?"

He chuckled and bent down so Genevieve could hear him. "I'll have her back in five minutes."

And with that, he led her sister to the crowd by the stage, where the two of them moved together in a way Genevieve had never danced with a man before. They were smiling and laughing, and she had to admit, she liked seeing Rhonda happy. But she still didn't like her with Sebastian.

When the song was over, she watched her sister head off toward the restroom. Surprisingly, Sebastian returned to their table rather than to his friends.

“Your sister’s fun,” he said as he took his seat again.

Genevieve nodded toward the group by the pool table. “Won’t your friends miss you?”

He glanced at them and shrugged. “They don’t seem to.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Nah, we’re not that close.”

“Look, I know Rhonda might seem like someone you could have a good time with, but she’s been through a lot. She thinks she’s ready to get out there and have some fun, but she’s not the kind of girl to casually hook up with guys.”

“You wound me, Genevieve,” Sebastian said. “Do you really think so little of me?”

Genevieve blushed. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to watch out for my sister.”

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“I was only trying to cheer her up with the dance.” He lay his hand on top of hers as he’d done at the restaurant earlier that day. “And so you know, I’m not the kind of guy who hooks up with random girls either. Not anymore.”

Her eyebrow lifted. “Oh? What about the blonde?” She tilted her head toward the woman who’d been eyeing them since he’d left her behind.

“I’m not above a little flirting once in a while.”

“I’ve noticed.”

He laughed, then turned serious. “So, her ex was pretty bad, huh?”

Genevieve nodded. “You know how alcoholics say they don’t need to drink, that they can quit whenever they want? That was Nolan.”

“He’s an alcoholic?”

“No. He’s a sociopath. He’d say horrendous things to her, insult her appearance and things she did, threaten to leave her just to get his way. He was a pathological liar and cheated on her all the time. Then when she’d confront him, he’d apologize over and over, beg her not to leave him, tell her he’d never do it again and he couldn’t live without her. The cycle went on and on for years.”

“Oh, man, that’s awful.”

“I’m not sure she would’ve left him if our dad hadn’t died. Nolan made some excuse

for not coming to the funeral, when he was really with another woman. That was the absolute last straw for her.”

“Good for her.”

Genevieve shook her head. “I used to think maybe Nolan had some redeeming quality in him, but I don’t believe guys like him are capable of change. They’re just born losers.”

Sebastian didn’t respond to that, and when she looked over at him, he was staring down at the beer bottle in his hands.

“Was that too personal to share with my boss?” she asked nervously.

He lifted his eyes to hers and gave her a weak smile. “Not at all. I’m sorry about your dad.”

“Thank you.”

He glanced back at his supposed friends. “I really should get back to them. Thank Rhonda for the dance for me.”

“I will.”

“Enjoy your night.”

“You too, Sebastian.”

She watched him walk away. Something about his demeanor had changed since he’d arrived at their table. She wondered if it was something she’d said.

Rhonda arrived at the table a minute later. “Where’d he go?”

“Back to his friends.”

“Oh.” She shrugged her shoulders. “That was fun while it lasted. Is Kurtis as good looking as Sebastian is?”

She smiled, thinking about those deep hazel eyes that had crinkled at the corners when he laughed. “Better.”

“I don’t know if that’s even possible.”

The girls laughed together and finished their fries and drinks before heading out for the night.

“Are you going to the farm on Sunday?” Rhonda asked when they arrived back at Genevieve’s.

“Yeah, I’ll be there. I haven’t been over there in a month. Mom probably wonders what happened to me.”

“I was there last week. I think Charisma misses you.”

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“Oh, Charisma. I really need to get out there and ride her soon or she’ll forget me.”

“She’ll never forget you.”

She felt horrible for not having gone to the farm to see her horse lately. Luna, the neighbor girl, came by four days a week to take the horses out and make sure they had the proper exercise, and she was afraid Charisma would start to think Luna was her person. She missed riding. It was her time to think and enjoy the outdoors and bond with her horse, but she hadn’t ridden as much since Daddy passed away. Now that Charisma was getting up there in years, Genevieve knew she should be spending more time with her, not less. She hoped she’d have more opportunities to visit now that she had a job that wasn’t as demanding of every extra minute of her time.

“I’ll have to take her out for a ride on Sunday.”

“I think it’s supposed to rain.”

Genevieve wrinkled her nose.

“Don’t forget to bring a dessert.”

“Mom will just make a comment about my weight.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be Sunday dinner if Mom didn’t insult us for our choices, now would it?”

“Insult me, you mean.”

Rhonda rolled her eyes. “Thanks for tonight.”

“Love you.” Genevieve hugged her sister tightly.

“I love you too,” Rhonda said with a smile. “See you Sunday.”

When her sister had gone and the apartment was quiet, she settled in on the couch and thought back over her day and her mind immediately settled on the exchanges with Kurtis. It was strange and foreign, this strong connection between them. A smile here. A look there. And she was positive it wasn't one-sided. He seemed to like her as much as she liked him. She'd never looked forward to going to work more in her entire life.

NINE

It had been far too long since Sebastian had visited his parents. They usually had a meal together once a month after church, but he'd skipped it as well as church this month in favor of work. If someone were to ask him if he was religious, he'd describe himself as a man of faith, but he knew at times he didn't act that way. Being away from church for long periods of time always affected him. Lying to Genevieve probably proved that point, and the more he thought about this charade, the more guilt started pushing its way in, making him think the whole pathetic situation made him unworthy of Genevieve in the first place.

But when he thought about his family, he chose to ignore those feelings, because he wanted so much more out of life. He wanted what his parents had. Love. Marriage. Children.

He knew his father, who grew up with little to nothing in the way of money, had built the company to make a better life for his family, but at times he wondered what life would have been like if the business hadn't become as big as it was.

Could anyone ever really get to know Sebastian outside of Schultz Chocolate—the ordinary, everyday guy, not the heir to a billion dollar company? He wanted that more than anything, and he knew it was why he'd kept his true identity from Genevieve. The Mercedes, yacht, private jet, family winery, beach house on Lake Michigan, and homes in Hawaii and California would surely make her see him differently.

As he drove to his parents' house, his mind was a mess, thinking about his good fortune meeting her that day, but waffling back and forth between coming clean and letting this play out. Being with his family would help. It was where he could always be himself. Not President of Schultz Chocolate. Just Sebastian.

When he pulled through the wrought iron entrance gate and up the historic cobblestone driveway they'd had imported from Europe, he released a contented sigh. Just the sight of his childhood home made him relax. Coming home was always a good thing. He really needed to do it more often.

Sebastian parked his Mercedes and walked past his sister's Porsche on the way in, hoping she wouldn't say anything about "Kurtis" around their parents. He entered the house to the sound of laughter from the kitchen and a smell he was all too familiar with. Excitement had him stepping more quickly through the wide open foyer, past the table with the giant floral arrangement in the center, and on into the expansive kitchen. Their eight-bedroom home was large by anyone's standards, but his mother had always decorated in a way that felt cozy and welcoming.

Harriet Schultz's eyes lit up at the sight of her son. "You're just in time."

He practically skipped across the kitchen and planted a kiss on his mother's waiting cheek. "Hi, Mom."

She wrapped her arms around him, and he brought her in, holding her close.

“I feel like I haven’t seen my baby boy in months.”

Sebastian pulled back enough to look down into the hazel eyes his resembled. “I know. I’m sorry.” He hugged her again. “I missed you too.”

His attention turned to Skylar, who was stirring a bowl filled with shaved premium Schultz Chocolate, heavy cream, and butter to make a silky ganache for truffles. Whenever truffles were made, he felt like a kid again. “Want me to start on the coating?”

“Sure.” Skylar gave him a look, but said nothing more.

He placed a block of chocolate on the cutting board and began shaving it down and chopping until it was fine so it would melt easily.

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“Where’s Gus?” he asked.

“He had other plans.” Skylar looked disappointed.

Dad walked in then and laid a tray on the counter, and Skylar placed the ganache in a pastry bag and began squeezing quarter sized rounds of chocolate onto the tray.

Sebastian watched them, standing side by side. Skylar most resembled Dad with her deep brown eyes and tall, strong nose. There was no mistaking that she was Ephraim Schultz’s daughter. Sebastian’s dark brown hair came from their father, but he looked most like their mother’s side of the family, while Augustus was a little of both—Mom’s eye and hair color, but Dad’s defining facial features. He hadn’t thought about it when he’d started this ridiculous farce with Genevieve, but now he hoped the fact that he looked the least like a Schultz would work to his advantage.

Mom put a pot of water on the stove to prepare for the next step. Coming together like this to make truffles on Granny Schultz’s birthday had become a tradition over the years. Sebastian’s heart ached because she was no longer around to be a part of it, but he knew she was still with them in spirit.

As they focused on their tasks, Sebastian couldn’t help but want to share all of this with someone someday. He thought about how much Genevieve had liked Great Granny’s truffles and wondered if one day he’d get to stand in this kitchen and make them together, or better yet, in their own kitchen, teaching their kids how to make them.

He shook his head. Okay, he was really losing it. He’d just met this girl, and he was

getting way too far ahead of himself. They hadn't even gone on a date yet, and he knew very little about her.

Before he'd given up on dating, he'd been the romantic of the family. That part of him had lay dormant for a long time, but he could feel it starting to come alive again. With Genevieve, he felt hopeful that tomorrow might be the start of something special.

When the water in the pan began to boil, Sebastian pushed the chocolate shavings from the cutting board into a large metal bowl and handed it to Mom, who set it over the pan of hot water to melt the chocolate. They could probably make this recipe in their sleep, they all knew it so well.

He leaned back against the counter and watched as Mom stirred the melting chocolate for coating and Skylar put the pan of chocolate into the fridge to cool.

"I didn't know if you'd make it tonight or not, Bash," Skylar said as she cleaned up the counter. She leaned closer and whispered, "Or is it Kurtis?"

"You're funny," he replied, but gave her a pleading look.

Dad laid a hand on Sebastian's shoulder, and he startled. "I'd like to talk to you about something if you have a moment or two."

"Sure, Dad." He followed along from the kitchen and down the hallway to his father's study.

Dad sank into the comfy leather chair by the window and pulled out his pipe.

Sebastian loved the smell of Dad's pipe tobacco with its subtle cherry aroma. He didn't care for it himself, but the scent felt like home.

“Am I working you too hard, son?” Dad asked.

“What? I love our company and my job. Why do you ask?” Sebastian took a seat in the leather wingback, separated from Dad’s chair by a small oval table that held a lamp.

“Your mother and sister seem to think—and I tend to agree—that you spend far too much time working and not enough time living life.”

He had no response, because it was true. He’d been more and more consumed with work as each year passed and had grown indifferent in the social areas of his life. Mostly due to fake friends and duplicitous women. He’d retreated into the comfort of work and family and trusted only old friends who had known him since childhood.

“I built this company to provide for my family. It has grown to something I couldn’t have ever dreamed it would, and while I worked hard to get us here, I never let it take away from the time I spent with your mother or you kids. I loved my work, but I cherished the important things in life. And I made time for them. For family, for attending and serving at church, for giving back to our community. That’s why the Schultz Foundation means so much to me. I always wanted to be able to use the money I made to give back.”

Sebastian nodded. He knew all of this about his father, but he wasn’t sure where Dad was going with it.

“Your sister tells me this year’s charity event is going to be something special. I’d like you to be a part of it.”

“I always have a part in the event, Dad.”

“I’d like you to be even more involved this year.”

Sebastian crooked his head. “Did Sky put you up to this?” He wondered if she was messing with him over the whole Kurtis thing.

Dad looked completely serious. “Nobody put me up to this. I think stepping away from some of your regular duties and helping the new coordinator will get you focused on something good and meaningful. I don’t want you to end up married to your job, Sebastian.”

This wasn’t at all what he was expecting when he’d sat down with his father, and it gave him a feeling of panic. He’d known he would be taking on extra work by helping Genevieve, but the thought of getting behind in his regular work made him uneasy. “Who’s going to keep up with everything if I’m not there?”

“Augustus and Skylar can pick up the slack.”

Sebastian snorted. “Skylar, yes. But Gus? He’s in the office maybe once a week at best.”

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“I’ll handle your brother.” Dad gave him a pointed stare as he took another puff of his pipe. “Will you do this for me? And for yourself?”

“Of course.” He didn’t mention that he already planned to help Genevieve or that he was happier about that than any of the work he’d done lately.

A smile spread across Dad’s face. “You’ve made me very proud.”

“For agreeing to help with the fundraiser?”

“Not only that. I’m proud of who you are, of the man you’ve become.”

The guilty feeling was back. If Dad knew he had pretended to be someone other than a Schultz, he wouldn’t be so proud.

“I see great things in your future, my boy.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Dad smiled and went back to his pipe.

“When you met Mom in college, did you know right away that she was the one you wanted to spend your life with?” Sebastian asked.

Dad’s eyebrows raised at this line of questioning. “Actually, we hated each other at first.”

Sebastian was taken aback. “You never told me that. I thought you met her and were crazy about her from the start.”

Dad shook his head.

“But you always said she was yours from the moment she tasted Granny’s truffles.”

A little chuckle was his father’s response. “It took me months to get her to even try one.” He turned his eyes to the sky outside and looked as if he was reliving a memory. “At first, I didn’t want her anywhere near me.” He looked at Sebastian again. “She gave me attitude for the longest time because I set up my truffle cart near her dorm at the same time she was coming back from class every day. There was always a long line blocking the door, and she hated all the commotion I caused.”

Sebastian laughed. “Did you set it up there because of her?”

“Not at first. But once I knew it bothered her, I kept coming back for more. And then I realized that I looked forward to that adorable scowl on her face every day. Took me a while after that to get her to actually try a truffle, but like I said, after that, she was mine.” Dad winked.

“I love that.” Sebastian took a breath in and let it out again. “I met someone today.”

Dad set his pipe down and rested his elbow on the arm of the chair and his chin on his fist. “Oh?”

Sebastian rested his head back against the cool leather. “She’s amazing. So smart and funny. And she’s so beautiful, but I don’t think she even realizes it.” He shook his head and looked at Dad again. “I feel like she’s different. Special. But I’m so afraid she’ll turn out to be like the others and only want me for what I can give her.”

“Go with your gut.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t trust my gut anymore.”

“If she’s as special as you think, then she’ll see you for you. All you can do is be yourself.”

An uneasiness settled in the pit of his stomach then. Be himself? Who was he? Sebastian Schultz or Kurtis from PR?

“Your mother and I have prayed for you since before you were born, and even though we don’t know her yet, we’ve prayed for your future wife.”

“You have?”

Dad nodded. “Yes, especially after all the hurtful people you’ve encountered. Wealth is a blessing, but it can also be a curse at times. You’ve dealt with your share of parasites over the years, and we want better for you. We’ve prayed for someone special who would love our Sebastian, even if he didn’t have a penny to his name.”

“That means a lot,” Sebastian said.

“We love you, son. Your happiness is our greatest desire.” Dad reached over and patted him on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Dad.”

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As they emerged from the study and rejoined the ladies, Sebastian thought of Genevieve again. If she could get to know him as a regular guy, then maybe finding out he had billions of dollars wouldn't make a difference to her, because she'd know and love him for who he was.

That had been his initial thought when he'd started all this, and Dad's words had taken away the doubt and solidified it for him. Although, if Dad knew what he'd done, he surely would've tried to talk him out of it.

But he was in it now.

Sky was popping a truffle into her mouth when they entered the kitchen. She picked up another and tossed it at him. "Think fast!"

He grabbed it with lightning reflexes and tossed it into his mouth, cracking the chocolate coating with his teeth, letting the smooth center melt on his tongue. "So good."

After an evening of laughter, good conversation, and plenty of reminiscing about Granny Schultz, Sebastian and Skylar said goodnight to their parents and walked out together.

"So, you're really going through with all this Kurtis business?" Sky asked as they stopped by her car.

"Please don't give me a hard time about this. I just want her to know me when she thinks I don't have a penny to my name." He thought of what his dad had told him

earlier.

Skylar patted his arm. “Well, let’s hope she still likes you when she finds out you have a lot of pennies.”

TEN

No matter how much slow, meditative breathing Genevieve did, her excitement could not be controlled. She’d settled into her office and attempted to work, all the while knowing that at eleven o’clock, Kurtis would be meeting her for their trip to the yacht club. She rubbed her hands down her pencil skirt, not quite believing her palms were actually sweating. Had she ever been this anxious to see a guy before? She couldn’t remember ever reacting this way.

After one too many cups of coffee, she was more jittery than when she’d arrived. She needed to remain professional. He was a coworker. An acquaintance, really. They barely knew each other. And though she thought he was a very handsome man and felt something more than just attraction for him, she didn’t believe in the whole love at first sight thing. She couldn’t possibly fall in love with a man after knowing him for a day. Could she?

At eleven on the nose, her office phone rang, and she nearly jumped out of her chair.

“Genevieve Willis,” she answered.

“Hey, it’s, uh ... Kurtis. I’m downstairs whenever you’re ready.”

“I’ll be right there.” He’d stumbled a little when he spoke. Could he be nervous to see her too?

They hung up, and she grabbed her things and was on her way. As she walked

through the lobby, she could see him standing out front, looking around and waiting. He looked heartachingly good standing there in a pale blue button-down shirt and light khaki chinos.

His face lit up when she pushed through the front door. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” She tried not to grin like the Cheshire cat at him.

“Is it okay if we take your car?” he asked. “Mine’s in the shop.”

“Sure. What’s wrong with it?” she asked as they walked to her car.

His eyebrows pinched together momentarily. “Brakes needed replaced.”

“That probably set you back a pretty penny.”

“Yeah.” As they arrived at her car, he hustled ahead of her and opened the driver side door.

“Thank you.” She loved that he was such a gentleman.

Kurtis moved to the other side and climbed in, putting on his seatbelt as she started the car. His eyes widened at the music playing on the radio. “Country music, huh?”

She looked at him curiously. “Not a fan?”

He chuckled. “Not particularly. Twang is not my thing.”

“Country music these days is much different than it used to be. It’s changed a lot, even in the past ten years. It’s much more modern, but with the same themes.”

“Women, drinking, and heartbreak?” He raised an eyebrow.

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She started laughing as she drove out of the parking lot. “All right. Maybe it’s not that much different when it comes to the content of the songs. But the music itself has evolved.”

At that moment, the radio station chose to play “Boot Scootin’ Boogie”, the 1992 hit by Brooks & Dunn.

“Uhhh ...” Genevieve looked over at Kurtis, who simply shook his head.

“I rest my case.”

“This is an oldie but goodie,” she said through her laughter.

“If you say so,” he said with a grin.

“I do.” She teasingly stuck her nose in the air. “This is the music of my childhood, and I love it. I won’t apologize for that.”

“Wouldn’t want you to.” He turned the radio up, which earned him a smile.

Genevieve happily sang along while tapping her hand on the steering wheel and dancing in her seat. She could feel him watching her, and she lowered the volume a little and gave him a smile.

“So, you said yesterday that you grew up on a farm, and now I find out you love country music. Were you in the rodeo too?”

“As a matter of fact, I was.”

He laughed again. “I was kidding, but really? Tell me more about that.”

“I grew up on a farm about an hour south of here, and I competed in barrel racing with my horse, Charisma.”

“Charisma. That’s a great name.”

“She’s the best, but she’s getting up there in age now.” Her heart ached a little thinking about Charisma being taken care of by Luna and not her.

“Sorry to hear that.”

She suddenly felt something brush the side of her thigh. It was so slight and quick that she wasn’t sure it had happened at all. But when she glanced down, he was moving his hand to rest on his own knee, and from the way he was looking out the window with his bottom lip between his teeth, she knew he’d reached out and touched her leg, as if he was trying to comfort her over Charisma.

Did she make him as nervous as he made her? It appeared so, and she liked knowing that.

“How long have you worked at Schultz Chocolate?” she asked.

“Seems like forever.”

“Did you start out in the gift shop and work your way up? Because you seemed to know your way around the place.”

He laughed a little. “That’s just because I go in there every morning after the gym for

a truffle.”

“You eat a truffle after working out? Doesn’t that sort of defeat the purpose?”

He shook his head. “Granny’s Truffles are good for you. You should eat at least one a day.”

“I’m sure they’re completely fat-free, sugar-free, gluten-free, and calorie-free, right?”

“Absolutely.”

They laughed together, and it felt so nice. It had been a few years since she’d been on a date. She mentally slapped herself. This isn’t a date.

“Are you allergic to gluten?” he asked. “You mentioned gluten-free.”

“No, but my mom would tell me that I should eat like I am. She wants me to stop eating just about any food that isn’t chicken, fish, or vegetable.”

His brow furrowed. “Why?”

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“Because I need to watch my weight.”

His mouth fell open then. “Is that a joke?”

“No.” She blushed a little and hoped he wouldn’t notice.

“If your mother says you should lose weight, she’s crazy.”

“That is the consensus most days.”

“But you don’t believe her, right? You don’t actually think you need to lose weight.”

She wasn’t sure how she let the topic of conversation veer in this direction. Her mother had contributed to her negative body image when she was younger, and while she had gotten past a lot of that, some days she still felt like being more on the petite side with ample curves meant she needed to watch what she ate.

“Genevieve.”

She looked over at him and found a seriousness in his expression.

“There isn’t a single thing about you that isn’t perfect.” His sincerity was sweet.

“You’re stunning just as you are.”

Her cheeks were on fire now, and she tried to focus on the highway ahead and not the incredibly endearing man sitting beside her.

After several minutes of silence, she gave him a quick glance. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything," he replied.

"Are you involved with Skylar Schultz?"

His sudden and maniacal laughter had her thinking she was insane for asking.

"Is that a no?"

"That's a gigantic no," he responded, still fighting back laughter.

"Is something wrong with her? Because from where I was sitting, she's a beautiful, intelligent woman that any man would find attractive."

He coughed as he stopped laughing, then nodded. "She is all of those things. Of course."

"Because ... I saw you hug her yesterday."

"She's ... the boss's daughter. I've known her for a long time, and we're friends."

Friends. Oh, how she hoped that was true.

"Why do you ask?"

His eyes were on her again. She could feel it as if he was actually touching her in some way. "Just curious." She attempted to sound nonchalant. "Figuring out the relationships in the office. You know, so I have something to talk about at the water cooler."

That got her a chuckle. “Right.”

They traveled along without conversation for a few minutes until Genevieve took the exit toward Holland.

“It’s been so long since I’ve been to Lake Michigan.” She broke the silence.

“That’s a shame. It’s one of the best things about living here.”

“I know. And every summer I say I’m going to make the time to get to the beach, but then I let other stuff get in the way.”

“Isn’t that the way it goes as we get older? Darn responsibilities.”

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“Yeah.” She wondered how old Kurtis was, but she didn’t ask. She assumed early thirties, like her. “So, you spend a lot of time at the lake?”

“Not as much as I used to. My parents have ... had a cottage there.”

“That must have been nice. My sister and I used to go to the beach here in Holland or up to Grand Haven quite often when we were in high school.”

“Is your sister younger or older?”

“Rhonda’s older by three years.”

“Are you close?” he asked.

“Very. She’s more than my sister. She’s my best friend. I tell her everything.” She glanced over and saw him looking out the window, and her gaze dropped to his shirt, taking in the width of his chest and the way the sleeves hugged what she could only assume were very nice muscles beneath. She couldn’t help remembering Rhonda’s comments about guys with muscles, and she looked away quickly as a blush colored her cheeks. “How about you? Any siblings?”

He stayed silent for several long moments, as if he was deep in thought, and she noticed his mouth opened a couple times as if he was going to say something but didn’t. She wondered if she’d pried or touched on a sensitive subject. Maybe his sibling had died. Or maybe they’d had a falling out.

“I have a brother and a sister,” he finally answered.

“Older or younger?”

“Both younger.”

“Are you close?”

“Yeah.”

She wondered if there was something he wasn't telling her, because he didn't seem comfortable sharing about his family. Maybe that would come as they got to know each other better. This wasn't a date, but simply talking to him made her happier than she'd been in a long time.

They soon turned into the yacht club in Holland, and Kurtis beat her out of the car and raced around to open the door for her. He extended his hand, which she happily took, and tingles made their way up her arm on contact.

“Thanks.” She smiled up at him at the moment his hand rested against her lower back. Every nerve in her body focused on the point of contact, and she involuntarily shivered as his hand slid up a little. She hoped he hadn't noticed. Her body's reaction to his touch was on a whole different spectrum of feeling and emotion than when Sebastian had touched the same spot yesterday.

They were closer than they'd ever been before, and she could feel the heat radiating off of him and smell the musky scent of his cologne or aftershave. It was intoxicating, and she started walking toward the yacht club entrance just so she could escape it and keep herself from leaning further into him and embarrassing herself.

“Ready?” he asked as he held the door for her.

“As I'll ever be.”

ELEVEN

Sebastian wanted more. He loved getting to know little things about Genevieve, but he wanted to know everything. He wanted to know all about her childhood, her parents and sister, how she came to work at Schultz Chocolate, what led her to work for non-profits and coordinate events. He'd already been certain that there was a connection between them, and as their time together went on, it became a truth he could not deny. She was wonderful, and he liked her. Even more than he'd anticipated.

There was just one huge problem ... Kurtis. He was really beginning to hate his new identity. He hated that he couldn't share openly about Gus and Sky, and that he'd given her short responses. He hated that he couldn't take her to the beach house on Lake Michigan. He worried she wouldn't be able to get to know him like he wanted. But he had to be sure about her. He had to know she truly cared about him. And he had to know she wasn't like the others.

They walked into the yacht club office to meet with Barbara, head of events, and Sebastian listened while Genevieve went over her plan for the regatta. It would take a lot to spread the word about this event in six week's time, but she was confident it could be done, and come the end of July, they'd have an excellent turnout. Listening to her talk about it, she had him convinced as well.

Sebastian enjoyed all facets of business—marketing being one of the focuses of his college education—and he enjoyed spending time with Genevieve. So working together to come up with a plan to publicize this event was a giant win-win situation.

Barbara led them through the building to the half indoor/half outdoor event space—the possible location for the gala.

“It's perfect,” Genevieve gushed.

“We host several regattas through the yacht club each summer,” Barbara told them. “People from the community enjoy coming out to watch, and your ideas to get them involved with activities for them and their children will make this a wonderful event.”

Genevieve’s smile said it all. “I believe it will be.”

“Well, let’s get the paperwork sorted out and talk payment.”

After all of the details were in order, Sebastian opened the door for Genevieve, laying his hand on her lower back again. He thought he felt her wince like she had earlier and nearly removed his hand, but then she leaned into him more as they walked.

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“I think that went great,” he told her.

She did a little skip and a hop as they reached her car. “So do I. Thank you for coming along.”

“Just doing my job.” He waited for her to unlock the car and opened the door for her again.

She rewarded him with a smile that made his heart skip a beat.

He closed her door gently behind her and rounded the car to get in. “We should stop by the beach before we head back,” he said as he pulled his door closed.

She looked over at him in surprise. “Are you serious?”

“Heck yeah. Why not? You said you hadn’t been in a while.” He hoped she’d go for it, because he didn’t want their time together to be over yet.

She appeared to be turning the idea over in her mind for a few moments, and then a smile spread across her face, revealing the cutest dimple in her right cheek. “Why not.”

As she drove them down Ottawa Beach Drive to Holland State Park, he repeatedly glanced over at her. He couldn’t help it. All he wanted to do was look at her. He tried not to stare. Not at her smooth legs when he opened the door for her. Not at her bare feet when she kicked her shoes off and tossed them into the car. Not at her light pink painted toenails, which made her even more adorable. He tried. But in this case, he

didn't mind failing.

The beach wasn't overly crowded, scattered mostly with moms and their babies or small children, but it was still quite busy for a day in early June. The air temperature was definitely warm enough for a day at the beach, but not many people were in the water, which meant it was probably too chilly for swimming.

They walked across the sand, sinking in here and there, bumping into each other, and laughing. It was the most fun Sebastian had had in a long time.

When they strolled closer to the water, he removed his shoes and socks, rolled up his pants, and waded in ankle-deep. "Oh, that's cold."

Genevieve walked in beside him and went deeper until the water was almost to her knees. With her petite frame, it would only take a wave that would make it to his knees to completely cover her lower body.

"Wimp. It's not that cold." She kicked a little water at him.

"Hey, we still have to go back to work, you know."

She kicked at the water again, soaking one of his rolled up pant legs.

"Genevieve!" He moved closer to her and bent down with his hand hovering over the water. "Two can play that game. Do you really want to go there?"

Her lips pressed together as she thought about it. "You're right. We do have to go back to work."

He straightened again and nodded. "That's what I thought."

She moved slowly toward the shore, eyeing him with each step.

He watched her curiously, turning toward her as she moved, the two of them circling each other. “Genevieve.” He said her name slowly, as if in warning.

She suddenly began kicking water right at him, and he immediately bent over, cupping his hands, and tossing water at her.

When they’d both had enough, they were soaked, head to toe, and laughing so hard they could barely breathe. Her hair was plastered to her head, and she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Droplets of water trailed down her face. He stepped closer and watched one slip over the light smattering of freckles across her nose and hang from her lip before falling. His eyes remained fixed on her lips. Never in his life had he wanted to kiss a woman more than he wanted to kiss Genevieve now.

Instead, she smiled shyly, breaking his stare, and walked up onto the sand.

Sebastian took in a steadying breath and followed her, grabbing his shoes and socks as they headed across the beach.

“I probably should have thought about what I was wearing before our little water fight.” She crossed her arms over her chest. Her white button-down shirt was completely soaked, and she kept pulling it away from her skin as best she could so she wouldn’t give him or any other beachgoers something to see.

Sebastian tried not to look as he pointed toward the snack bar. “The gift shop probably has towels.”

“Awesome,” she replied. “I’ll go hide out in the bathroom while you find out.”

He chuckled. “Okay.”

She gave him a little smile and scurried off to the women's restroom. He watched her hurry along the sidewalk until she disappeared around the corner, then headed into the gift shop. There were all the usual staples—sunscreen, beach umbrellas and chairs, sunglasses. He stopped by a rack of souvenir T-shirts and chose one in a dark heather grey with "Holland, Michigan" embroidered on the front in pink before moving to the display of towels. His attention immediately went to the pink striped towel with the same embroidery as the shirt, and he picked one up for Genevieve and a blue one for himself.

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He paid and walked to the end of the building, pulling open the women's restroom door.

"Genevieve," he called out.

"Yeah, I'm still in here. Did you get me a towel?"

An older woman standing just inside the door by the sink gave him a dirty look. "You can't come in here."

"I wouldn't do that, miss." He flashed her a devastatingly handsome smile, which turned her look of disapproval into a shy blush instead.

Genevieve walked out of one of the stalls at the end of the room, washed her hands, then met Sebastian at the door, grabbing the towel he offered and quickly wrapping it around her shoulders and chest.

They walked outside, and he wrapped his towel around himself and leaned back against the brick wall while she went about drying off. She was short enough that the large beach towel practically wrapped around her entire body like a cocoon. Her arms slid out from under the towel as she began squeezing excess water from her long blonde hair and combing through it with her fingers. He couldn't take his eyes off of her. Every move she made was hypnotic.

"Kurtis?"

He shook himself out from under her spell. "Sorry, what?"

“I asked if you were ready to go.” She smirked, obviously amused that he was staring at her like some kind of fool.

“You don’t want to walk out on the pier?”

She looked down at her appearance. “I really think we should be getting back, don’t you?”

“Probably.” He was enjoying just being with her, and going back to the office was the last thing he wanted. “Oh, I got you a dry shirt.”

She took the bag he held out to her and pulled the shirt from within. “That was thoughtful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Let me change, and we’ll go.”

Sebastian lay his head back against the brick wall. He really didn’t want to go back just yet.

Genevieve rejoined him a few minutes later, looking adorable in the shirt he’d bought her. Her hair had been pulled back in a wet ponytail, giving him a better view of the smooth skin of her neck. He was enamored by the spot where it curved into her shoulder and fought himself from leaning forward and pressing his lips there.

“Ready?” she asked just as her stomach growled. Loudly. She let out a little laugh. “Guess we should stop and pick up some lunch on the way.”

“I have an idea.” He reached for her hand as if it was the most natural thing in the world, but the surprised look in her eyes told him it was too much, too soon. He gave

it a quick squeeze, let go, and started walking toward the car.

Get it together, Sebastian.

Genevieve wasn't like the other girls, the ones who knew who he was and would've done much more than hold his hand if he'd asked. And thinking he might scare her off terrified him.

"Where are we going?" she asked when they were back in the car, driving out of the parking lot.

"To a place that's pretty much required after a day at the beach."

A smile spread across her face. "It's Captain Sundae, isn't it?"

His shoulders sagged. "You weren't supposed to guess so quickly."

"Oh my gosh, Rhonda and I always went there. I haven't been in so long."

"So, you approve?"

"I approve." The smile was still there, and it made him so happy every time he caused it. "Who doesn't like ice cream for lunch?"

"What's your favorite thing to get there?" he asked.

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“It’s been years since I’ve been, but probably the Peanut Pirate, if they still even have that. What do you like?”

“The Tommy Turtle, of course.”

She laughed. “I forgot all about the Tommy Turtle. I’m not a big pecan fan, though.”

“But Tommy Turtle’s so good. Buttered pecans and all that caramel and chocolate.”

“I wonder if they use Schultz Chocolate,” she said with a smile.

“I don’t think so, but I’m willing to overlook it.”

“That’s very big of you.”

When they were only a few minutes from arriving at the Captain Sundae entrance, Sebastian’s phone rang. He nearly answered with his name, but he caught himself at the last second and simply said, “Hello?”

“Sebastian?”

“This is.” He hoped Genevieve hadn’t heard the man’s voice through the phone.

“It’s Officer Wood.”

Sebastian groaned, knowing full well what this call was about. “What’s he done this time?”

“He got mouthy with a guy at a bar over in Eastown.”

“Where is he now?”

“In my car. Should I take him home?”

“Please.”

“Will do.”

“Thank you, Oliver. I’ll be there shortly.”

“See you when you get there.”

Sebastian hung up and stared at his phone for a few seconds, unsure if he should call Skylar, hating the idea of calling their parents. He’d wait and see what condition Gus was in this time before he decided on the next step.

“Is everything all right?” Genevieve interrupted his train of thought.

“I’m sorry. We’ll have to get our Captain Sundae fix another day. I’ve got something important to take care of. Can you drop me back at the office?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.” He looked out the window, feeling disappointed that his time with Genevieve was cut short, but even more disappointed in his brother. Gus had gone a long time without getting into trouble. Over a year, in fact, since his last brush with the law. He’d been lucky so far to have escaped any kind of actual police custody or time in jail. Thanks to their good friend, Oliver Wood, who had luckily been there the few times police had been called to intervene and had let him off with a warning

every time. So far. But that could only go on for so long if Gus continued his irresponsible behavior.

A hand on his arm stole his attention. “Is there anything I can do?”

He lay his other hand over hers and shook his head.

She gave him a little smile and drove on toward the office.

Oh, how he wished he could open up to her about his life, but she didn’t even know who he really was.

Gus looked pale and sallow. Definitely not the dapper, put-together businessman he appeared to be only yesterday. He was seated on the floor in front of the sofa and looked past Sebastian as if he wasn’t really there. Oliver looked like a giant standing over him. He was a tall man, enough that he had to look down a little at Sebastian, and he was certainly intimidating in his police uniform.

“He threw up in my car,” Oliver informed him.

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Sebastian rolled his eyes. “We’ll take care of that for you.” He pulled out his cell and phoned their butler, Gerard.

“Yes, Mr. Schultz,” Gerard answered.

“Oliver Wood’s police cruiser needs cleaned and detailed. We’re at Gus’s loft. And please send a car to take Oliver wherever he needs to go.”

“Yes, sir. A car will be there in ten minutes and his vehicle will be ready within the hour,” he replied and hung up. What would they do without Gerard? He was more than just their butler and had been managing the Schultz family household since Sebastian was a kid.

“One hour and your car will be good as new,” Sebastian told Oliver.

Oliver nodded and glanced over at Gus. “I was starting to think he’d really done it, turned over a new leaf and all.”

“So was I. So were we all.” He’d been hoping Gus was done with all the drinking. Dad had told Gus on more than one occasion that if he wanted to be part of the family business, he had to stop his playboy ways and prove he could be serious. And they’d all been so proud of the way he’d turned things around. He wasn’t always present to oversee all of the day-to-day at the office, but he had started to steer away from his old lifestyle, and it seemed like he wanted to take his responsibilities in the company seriously.

Dad wasn’t going to be happy about this incident.

“Thanks for all your help and your discretion, Oliver. You know we appreciate it so much.”

“What are friends for?” he replied as they walked to the door.

“A car should arrive downstairs for you in a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

Once Oliver was on his way down the stairs, Sebastian closed the door and looked over at his brother, whose eyes were closed and mouth hung open. It saddened him to see Gus that way.

Sebastian moved to the sofa and sat down. The sinking of the cushion startled Gus awake, and he slowly rotated his head to face his brother.

“Oh, it’s you, Bash. What are you doing at the bar in the middle of the afternoon?” he slurred out.

“We’re at your place, Gus.”

Gus looked around, suddenly realizing where they were. “My puh-lace. Puh. Lace. Plaaaace. Place.” He chuckled. “Place is a weird word.”

Sebastian handed him a pillow from the end of the sofa. “Sleep it off, brother.”

“Mil ...” He struggled to keep his eyes open or get his words out. “Milter ... Milton insulted Skylar.”

“Milton Hanley?”

Gus managed a nod.

“Why were you even talking to that guy?”

He shrugged. “He came in after I got there.”

“And what? You got drunk together?”

Gus’s face scrunched up as if he was struggling to remember. “I think I was already drunk.”

“Just rest, Gus. We’ll talk later.”

A nod was Gus’s response as he squeezed the pillow close and slid to lying down on the floor, mumbling things Sebastian could not understand. Only three words slipped through.

Never good enough.

Sebastian shook his head sadly. He really thought Gus would have it all together by the time he turned thirty.

TWELVE

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On Wednesday, Genevieve settled in for the morning in her office. Kurtis hadn't come back after his phone call, and she wondered what that was all about. It had seemed personal and something serious enough to take his happy mood and turn it sad in five seconds flat. And as much as she wished she could help with whatever it was, they barely knew each other. She couldn't expect him to open up to her about what was going on in his life.

She'd thought about calling him, but there was nothing urgent or pressing for him to help her with, and she needed to dig in to the tasks ahead of her. She pulled her notepad from within her bag and read through the notes she'd scribbled after she'd returned from the yacht club. Now that they had the location set, she needed to meet with vendors—caterers, light and sound engineers, bands, security, etc. There were guest lists to create, sponsors and donors to contact, volunteers to gather. They needed a marketing budget and a publicity plan. Invitations, press releases ... the list went on and on.

Strangely, when she read over the list again, she didn't feel the slightest bit of apprehension. She felt certain that by the time the regatta arrived, every item on her list would be crossed off, and she was confident this would be the best event the Schultz Foundation had ever held.

People on the marketing floor seemed chatty that morning. Genevieve wasn't sure if this was the norm or if there was something special going on that made them so, but she could hear a lot of conversation happening outside her door. A few times throughout the morning, she nearly closed that door, but being new, she didn't want to be antisocial, even though nobody had stopped by to talk to her yet that day. Except for Marjorie, an assistant at the Foundation office, who had come over to give

her a list of vendors used at last year's charity event. But she hadn't really hung around to chat. In fact, she'd acted a little skittish and sort of rushed out as soon as Genevieve had thanked her.

For lunch, Genevieve headed to the employee lounge. It was an inviting space with several round tables as well as a comfy little nook with cushy chairs surrounding a coffee table. She took a seat at one of the tables across from a couple of women who were chatting, one who looked familiar.

"Hi," she greeted them, hoping she wasn't being too rude by interrupting.

"Hi," they both replied.

"I'm Genevieve, the newbie." She let out a nervous laugh.

"Bonnie," one said. "We met the other day."

"That's right," Genevieve replied. She'd met a lot of people on her tour of the building.

"I'm Tesha," the other said. "You're in the big office, right?"

Genevieve nodded. "I'm the new event coordinator for the Foundation."

"I don't think we've ever had anyone from the Foundation on our floor before." Tesha's tone seemed a little snarky.

"Oh, I don't know. That's just where they put me."

She was about to say more when the ladies went back to their previous conversation. She tried not to take offense or to pay too much attention to what they were saying,

but it was hard not to.

“I heard he beat up the guy,” Bonnie said. “And then Sebastian had to practically carry him out of the place.”

Genevieve perked up at the mention of their boss, but kept chewing her sandwich.

“I heard it was the police who dragged him out,” Tesha stated.

“I don’t think we’ll be seeing Gus around the office anymore.”

Tesha pouted. “Such a shame. He’s so easy on the eyes.”

Bonnie laughed. “Darn right.”

“Gus is the brother, right?” Genevieve asked, remembering at their work lunch that Sebastian had said their brother, Augustus, was the black sheep of the family.

“Yeah. He’s always been the party boy. Been a while since he’s done anything tabloid worthy, though.”

Genevieve shook her head. Tabloids were ridiculous. She couldn’t imagine having paparazzi tailing after you, following your every move, and reporting every little thing you did, including any mistakes you might make. That sounded like a miserable life.

When she’d been sitting across the fancy restaurant table from Sebastian, it had crossed her mind for a moment or two what it might be like to be with a man with unlimited amounts of money, to be able to do whatever she wanted, go wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted. But the downside to wealth and fame seemed to weigh heavier on the scale than the benefits ever would. She’d rather be with someone like

Kurtis—a simple, hardworking man—than someone filthy rich who had no privacy.

“Sebastian must be so upset,” Genevieve interjected.

“How would anyone be able to tell?” Bonnie said. “The guy walks around with a straight face all the time, absolutely no emotion.”

“Yeah, at least Gus knows how to feel, even if it does get him into trouble.”

Genevieve was confused. “Are we talking about the same person?” she asked. “Because I’ve met Sebastian, and he was very friendly. Charming and funny even.”

Tesha raised her eyebrows. “Maybe it’s because you’re cute.”

“Excuse me?” Her brow furrowed.

“Although, I kinda thought he was celibate,” Tesha continued. “I haven’t seen him with a woman in the three years I’ve been here.”

“Wanda down in accounting saw him leaving the building with a woman just yesterday,” Bonnie said.

“Someone who works here?” Tesha’s eyes widened.

Genevieve was annoyed, but the ladies didn’t seem to notice and continued to gossip about the Schultz brothers. At first, she was worried they might be talking about her leaving with Sebastian for lunch, but that was two days ago, not yesterday. She hated the idea that she could be gossiped about, though. She’d have to steer clear of these two.

After eating her lunch quicker than usual so she could get out of there, she headed back to her office to organize the list of people she needed to contact for the regatta.

Something about the lunch conversation stuck with her all afternoon, though. Sebastian was nothing like they described. That’s what had surprised her so much in their meeting. She was completely prepared to meet the unapproachable man she’d been warned about. But he wasn’t that guy at all.

She’d never been one for gossip, and listening to those ladies bad mouth the president of the company didn’t sit right with her. But as the new girl, she didn’t want to stir up trouble, which is why she’d kept her mouth shut.

And right now, staring at her to-do list, she had more important things to worry about.

THIRTEEN

After a day of babysitting Augustus while he slept, Sebastian was antsy to get back to the office. Work always excited him, but now he had another reason to look forward to it. A reason with long lashes surrounding pretty brown eyes. Eyes that belonged to a woman who looked at him like she'd known him for years rather than days.

He loved his brother and would do anything for him, and he wanted to help him find some direction in his life, but it had to be on Gus's terms. He had to decide to make the change. It couldn't be forced, as much as Sebastian wished it could.

As he finished putting away the blankets and pillow he'd used to sleep on Gus's sofa last night, he wondered what had set Gus off at the bar. What was it Milton Hanley had said about Skylar?

Milton was a creep. Someone Skylar had dated shortly after graduating from college, who was after more than just her money. A despicable man, who wasn't very good at taking no for an answer. There was a collective feeling of "good riddance" when Skylar gave him the boot.

As proud as he was that Gus had stood up for their little sister, he was still disappointed in him for choosing the route of the belligerent drunk.

The tabloids had run a picture of Gus all up in Milton's face and another of him on the sidewalk outside the bar after stumbling and falling to his knees. Darn paparazzi.

As bad as it would look for the family, a little twinge of worry came over him that Genevieve might see it and notice the caption read "Augustus Schultz," not Sebastian.

He quickly pushed that thought aside. If she saw the pictures, so be it. It was ridiculous to think he could keep such a thing from her in the social media age anyway. And he needed to focus on helping his brother at the moment and not worry about his nonexistent love life.

The bigger question in all this was why Gus had gone to the bar in the middle of the day in the first place.

Gus chose that moment to grumble from the place on the floor where he'd passed out. He twisted and sat up, groaning and gripping his head. "Why did you let me drink?" he asked.

"If I'd been there, could I really have stopped you?"

"Probably not." Gus sat up and whimpered.

"Here." Sebastian had a glass of water and ibuprofen at the ready.

Gus swallowed down the pills. "How much trouble am I in?"

"Well, you didn't actually beat Milton up, but you were pretty drunk and disorderly."

"Is this on my record now?"

"If I said yes, would it make a difference? Would it change your future choices?" Sebastian wished it was that simple.

Gus stared into the glass of water he was still holding.

"Oliver took care of it." Sebastian saw Gus visibly relax, his shoulders releasing some of the stress and anxiety over the situation. "You're a grown man, Gus, and I'm

not going to tell you what to do. Besides, it's all been said before.”

Gus nodded, knowingly. “I’m sorry I’m such a disappointment.

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“I love you, brother, and I want the best for you. And this is not it.”

“I know.” Gus struggled to get up onto the sofa. “Does the family know?”

Sebastian opened his phone to the tabloid photos and showed Gus the screen.

His face screwed up. “Not my best look.”

“If they don’t know by now, they will. PR’s probably going nuts with this today.”

Gus’s shoulders drooped and his head was down, and Sebastian could see how regretful he was over it all.

“What was it Milton said?” Sebastian asked.

Gus pressed his lips together, and his nostrils flared before he gritted out the nasty, crass things Milton had said about Sky.

Sebastian could picture Milton saying it, and if he’d been there with Gus, he might have decked him for it.

“We don’t tell Skylar about this,” Sebastian said. “She’s had enough trouble from that guy to last a lifetime.”

“Agreed.”

A text came across Sebastian’s phone then, and a smile spread across his face at

Genevieve's name and the simple message asking if he was okay.

"It's from her, isn't it?" Gus asked.

Sebastian looked over to find his brother wearing an amused grin. "Maybe."

"You dog." Gus's face suddenly fell. "Oh man, this is going to mess up everything for you, isn't it? She's gonna find out who I really am when she sees those pictures."

"Probably. Don't worry about it."

"Gah. The first girl you like in years and I mess it up. I really am good for nothing."

"Hey." Sebastian gave Gus a pointed look. "Don't you believe that for a second. You have so much to give in life, in our family, and in the company. You are important to us. To me. More important than this ridiculous predicament I've gotten myself into."

Gus's mouth tilted to one side in contemplation, as if he didn't quite believe it.

"You hear me?" Sebastian stared at him, trying to will Gus to see how serious he was.

Gus nodded. "I hear you."

He held up his phone. "She just asked if I was okay, because I was with her yesterday when I got the call, but I didn't tell her what it was about."

"I'm sorry, Bash."

Sebastian wasn't sure, but it looked like tears in his brother's eyes. It could have been from sleepiness and the hangover, though.

“I know you are.” He watched Gus rub at his eyes. “What were you doing at the bar, Gus?”

“Does there have to be a reason?”

“With you, I think there’s always a reason.”

“I’m a born loser, incapable of change. Just like him.”

Sebastian’s brow furrowed. “Like who?”

“It was something Genevieve said.”

“Genevieve? When?”

“At a club the other night.”

“Why were you at a club with Genevieve?” The green-eyed monster reared its ugly head.

“She was there celebrating her sister’s divorce from this awful man, and I realized what she said about him applies to me too. No matter what I do to try to change, it’s never enough. I’m a giant failure.”

“That’s not true.”

Gus narrowed his eyes at Sebastian. “You know it is. I’m not driven like you and Sky. I’ve never succeeded at anything in my life.”

“You’re smarter and more talented than you give yourself credit for. And you haven’t succeeded because you’ve bought into your own lies. You’ve used them as excuses not to take life seriously. But the time for excuses is over, and I think you know it.”

“When did you get to be so wise?” Gus mumbled.

“I have my moments.” He held up his phone. “This was definitely not one of them.”

Gus snorted out a laugh, then got a little smile on his face. “She’s really great, Bash.”

“So you like her?” He wished he’d been the one spending time with her at that club,

not Gus. What had they talked about? There was so much he wanted to know about her, and he hated that Gus might know more than he did.

“I do, but I wouldn’t do that to you, brother.” He pointed at Sebastian’s phone. “Don’t keep the lady waiting.”

Sebastian promptly focused on the message and began typing as Gus headed for the bathroom.

I’m okay. Family situation. All taken care of. How was work? Sorry to desert our dessert plans yesterday. ;)

He waited to see if any little dots bounced on his screen. They didn’t, but a text message came through a few moments later.

Rain check?

He could picture the way her eyes lit up when she smiled and that adorable dimple in her cheek. His fingers moved over the screen.

Anytime.

That evening, Sebastian and Gus were summoned to the house by their father. Whenever there was trouble within the family, especially anything that would affect them and their company that was public knowledge, they had a family meeting to talk things through.

Sebastian drove the two of them to the house, and Gus was quiet the entire way. He wasn’t normal, fun-loving Gus. He was so withdrawn, it was unsettling.

“You okay?” Sebastian asked before they pulled into the driveway.

“Not really.”

Sebastian gripped Gus’s shoulder and squeezed. “It will all work out. Trust me.”

“I wish I had your faith.”

“Last time I checked, we believed in the same God. He’s still there, Gus. He’ll never abandon you. And neither will we.”

Gus didn’t reply to that and quickly climbed out when Sebastian parked the car.

Gerard opened the door before they even reached it. “Good evening, sirs.”

“Good evening, Gerard.”

“Hey, Gerard.” Gus greeted him with a fist bump.

Harriet came swooping into the foyer, hugging and kissing on her boys.

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Sebastian gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Didn’t think I’d be back so soon, did you?”

“If I could see my children every day of the week, I’d be a happy mother.” Her eyes fell on Gus, and she opened her arms to him.

He fell into them like a little child in need of motherly love, and that’s exactly what she gave him. She whispered words Sebastian could not hear. He caught an “I love you” and “You’re going to be all right” as he left them alone and headed to the kitchen.

The mood was much different than Monday evening when they’d made the truffles. Although, Skylar did have some truffles out and was munching on them. She often did that when worried about something.

Dad was seated at the table in the breakfast nook, staring out the window at the hedges. When Mom and Gus joined them, he seemed to notice and stood from his place to come closer to his family.

“We have a bit of a situation to deal with after yesterday afternoon’s events,” Dad announced.

“What kind of situation?” Sebastian asked.

Mom stepped closer to Dad and circled her arms around his waist as his arm rested over her shoulders.

“Milton Hanley has decided to sue Augustus for assault and battery.”

Skylar dropped the truffle she'd been holding.

"What?" Gus's mouth fell open. "I didn't even hit the guy."

"He says you pushed him and threatened to end him."

Gus rolled his eyes. "Oh my gosh. That was just the alcohol talking. I wouldn't have actually hurt him. Although, I wanted to."

"Did you touch him?" Dad asked.

"I might have pushed him, but he had it coming."

"Even so, when someone wrongs us, we don't strike back. We turn the other cheek."

Gus's shoulders slumped and his head bowed sadly at their father's words.

"Our lawyers will be speaking to his, but if they can't talk him out of it, this will go on your record, Augustus. And I know Oliver was trying to be a friend and help our family as he has in the past, but I fear he may lose his job over this."

Sebastian saw Gus's chin begin to quiver, and he stepped closer and lay his hand on his brother's shoulder to give it a squeeze. But instead of accepting the support, Gus pulled away and moved out of reach.

"These are the consequences of your actions, son," Dad declared.

"I know, okay!" Gus cried. "I'm a grown man. Stop treating me like a little kid."

Dad walked across the kitchen and lay his hands on Gus's shoulders, tilting his head to try to get Gus to look at him.

Gus's eyes veered down and away.

"We love you, Augustus." Dad took hold of his face and turned it up toward him, and Gus's eyes finally met his. "We love you."

Tears filled Gus's eyes then, and it broke Sebastian's heart to see his brother this way.

"I'm sorry, Dad." Gus leaned forward, and Dad wrapped him tightly in his arms. "I know I messed up again. I know I've disgraced our family and you're ashamed to have a son like me."

Dad pulled back and took his face again, looking him in the eyes. "I may be disappointed by your choices, but I will never be ashamed that you are my son."

A weak smile crossed Gus's face then.

"This will all work itself out." Dad patted Gus on the shoulder and returned to Mom's side. "But as far as the company goes ... I don't want you there right now."

"At all?" Gus replied, looking shocked.

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“For the time being, no.”

“But I’ve been putting in more time there, trying to be more involved. Bash will tell you. I’ve tried to show you that I’m serious about the future of our company, and I want to be a part.”

“Until you can prove to us that you no longer prefer bars to boardrooms, I can’t have you there.”

“This is so unfair.”

Dad shook his head and shrugged. “Life’s not fair, son. I built this company from the floundering company my father started to the household name Schultz Chocolate has become. I worked very hard to get us here, and I know what this company needs to succeed.”

“And it doesn’t need me,” Gus stated matter-of-factly.

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying for now. Until we see a bigger change.”

“I have changed. If you can’t see that then I don’t know what else I can do.”

“If you’d actually changed, you wouldn’t have been falling over drunk outside a bar after threatening a man. I’m not saying we haven’t seen positive changes over this past year. But after yesterday, well, it’s not enough, son. You’re not there yet.”

“This is so much bull. I know I messed up. I do. But everyone makes mistakes

sometimes. I was sad, okay. I just wanted to relax and have a drink and not think about the mess that has been my life so far.”

“And how did that work out for you?”

Sebastian knew his father’s words weren’t meant to be sarcastic, but they came out that way, and he could see the change in Gus’s expression.

“That’s it. I’m so out of here.” Gus whirled around and headed for the door.

“Gus! Stop!” Skylar, who had been quiet up until then, raced after him.

The rest of them didn’t follow. They looked at each other with sadness in their eyes. But what could they do for Gus if he didn’t understand they were trying to help him?

A few minutes later, Skylar returned to the room with her hands on her hips. “Well, that went well. He left.”

“He’s a grown man, Skylar,” Sebastian replied. “We can’t make him do anything he doesn’t want to do.”

“This is all my fault,” she whimpered.

“It’s not your fault Milton was there and picked a fight with him,” Sebastian assured her.

“What if he leaves? For good?” she asked.

Dad squeezed Mom closer as she wiped away a few stray tears. “He won’t run forever.”

FOURTEEN

It seemed there were a million things to check off the list for the regatta, and Genevieve had accomplished about three of them in two day's time. She'd booked the location and reserved the dates. She had an appointment with a catering company to discuss food for the gala. She'd made a list of possible local businesses who might want to sponsor the event. But this was only the beginning.

"Knock, knock."

Genevieve looked up from her place at the desk, and her heart skipped a beat at the sight of Kurtis's smiling face. "Hey! Come in. How are you?" She'd been concerned after his family issues the other day.

"Not great, but better now." He gave her a smile, which caused her cheeks to warm. "How are you?"

Genevieve tapped the ink pen she was holding against her notepad, where she'd jotted down her seemingly endless list for this event. "Two days ago, I was feeling pretty confident about things, but I don't know how all this will get done in six weeks." She scanned the calendar on her desk. "Make that five weeks."

He pointed at her notepad. "You know, there's a program on the computer to organize lists like that, right?"

She doodled a little star next to one of the items. "I like the satisfaction of crossing things off as I go. You just can't get that from clicking a box on a computer screen."

He chuckled. "Interesting."

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She flipped back a couple pages and showed him past lists she'd made. "I mean, look at that. All crossed off. All done. There's nothing like that feeling of accomplishment."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I'll just use an app. I don't have time to write out a list."

"Suit yourself. I don't have a smart phone anyway, so I can't do apps."

His eyes widened. "You don't have a smart phone? How do you get anything done?"

She started laughing and held up her notepad and ancient flip phone.

"Oh my gosh, you're serious."

"It works for me."

"So, what's next on that notepad of yours?" he asked.

"Contacting potential sponsors, coming up with a budget, designing a logo for advertising, a marketing plan—"

"Take a breath," he told her.

She did just that and looked into his eyes. "Can I be honest with you?"

He glanced away toward her notepad then out the window. "I wouldn't want anything

else.”

“This is the biggest event I’ve ever coordinated. I mean, I’ve done this before, but on a much smaller scale. And honestly, I’m kind of nervous that I’ve bitten off more than I can chew with this one.” Her attention turned to her notepad again. “A regatta sounded like an amazing event, but now that I’m looking at this list—”

His hand moved atop hers, and her eyes shot up to his.

“It will be amazing, and you can do this. We’ll do it together.”

He left his hand there for several long moments as they looked into each other’s eyes. She wondered if he could feel her pulse beating rapidly or see her throat move as she swallowed hard. “Thank you, Kurtis,” she managed.

He looked away and removed his hand. “So, how about I make some calls while you work on the budget.”

She groaned. “My least favorite part.” She handed him the list of potential sponsors. “Have at it.”

“Want to get out of the office to work on this today?”

She couldn’t contain her smile. “What did you have in mind? The beach again? I’m not wearing white today.” She glanced down at her deep green sleeveless blouse.

He laughed and tilted his head toward the door. “We’d get no work done at the beach. I have a better idea. Come on.”

She quickly gathered up her things and stood.

“Don’t forget your notepad,” he teased as he typed something on his phone.

They walked to the private executive elevator, and she watched him press a button for the top floor. As they started to ascend, she felt a little like they were breaking a rule.

“Are we even allowed to be in here? I was told this was only for the big wigs.”

He softly touched her arm. “It’s fine.”

She eyed him again. “An employee perk I’m not aware of?”

“Let’s just say I’m Employee of the Year and leave it at that.”

“Are you now?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” He feigned shock.

“I don’t know you that well, so I don’t know if you’re a good employee or not.”

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“Well, we’ll have to do something about that, won’t we?” The right side of his mouth angled up in the cutest smile.

She liked flirtatious Kurtis. And darn right she wanted to do something about it. She wanted to know all there was to know about this man.

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened onto the roof of the building, which was a hidden oasis in the middle of the city. There was greenery and beautiful floral landscaping everywhere, a seating area to one side with long couches and chairs surrounding a low rectangular table, and in the center of the space was a gigantic white pergola wrapped in vines over a table and chairs.

He led her into the space. “It’s too beautiful out to work in a stuffy office. Am I right?”

Genevieve wasn’t sure she’d get any work done up here at all. She set her bag down and moved around the rooftop, admiring the flowers and the view of the city from above. “This is amazing.”

Kurtis moved to sit on the long sofa in the seating area, put his feet up on the table, and pulled out the list she’d given him. He looked over at her. “You can sit anywhere you want. The whole space is ours.”

She took in a deep, cleansing breath, enjoying being outside on a nice day. She picked up her bag and moved to the pergola table, opened her notepad, and started on the event budget.

Kurtis made call after call, chatting people up about the regatta, and secured several local companies as sponsors. Listening to him kept her from getting much done on the budget. He was clearly very good at his job, and probably did deserve the title of Employee of the Year, if there actually was one.

When the sun was high in the sky, Genevieve's stomach began to growl. Before she even had a chance to mention it, the elevator opened and a man came across the roof pushing a cart. She looked over at Kurtis, who didn't seem to notice, then back at the man, who came right to the table where she was sitting.

He lifted the lids from a few containers, revealing an assortment of meats and toppings and a variety of breads as well as gourmet cheeses.

"Can I make you anything, miss?" the man asked.

Kurtis joined her then and checked out the offerings. "I'll have the usual." He glanced over at her then. "Want a sandwich? My treat."

She took a look. "Turkey on whole wheat with provolone, lettuce, and a little light mayonnaise."

The man went about making their sandwiches as Kurtis took a seat next to her.

She moved her things aside and narrowed her eyes at him. "I didn't know you were ordering us lunch. I would've helped pay."

"Employee of the Year, remember?"

She laughed. "Oh, right. Employee perk."

The man gave them their food along with bottles of San Pellegrino mineral water, and

they enjoyed their meal in silence. Genevieve felt renewed to tackle more work after lunch. But just as she started to grab her papers again, a woman came from the elevator holding a cup in each hand.

As she neared the table, Genevieve's mouth fell open a little. "This isn't ..." She looked into the cup the woman handed her then over at Kurtis. "Are you serious? Captain Sundae?"

He wore the biggest smile she'd ever seen. "Peanut Pirate." He nodded toward her cup.

She started laughing as she watched him take a bite of his. "Tommy Turtle?"

He nodded. "You know it."

"I can't believe you had Captain Sundae delivered. How is that even possible?"

"They brought the ingredients and made it here."

"Wouldn't the ice cream melt on the way?"

"Confession ... there's a soft-serve ice cream machine in the executive dining room. But all the toppings are Captain Sundae, all the way."

She felt spoiled by this man, and it was really nice. "How are you this sweet? I've never met a man who would do even half of this for a girl he just met."

"Then you clearly haven't met the right men."

"Clearly," she replied as she enjoyed a scoop of ice cream, chocolate syrup, and Spanish peanuts.

“Until now.” The way he said it, with that deep tenor to his voice, warmed her all over.

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Her eyes met his, and she watched as he took her in, his gaze moving over every part of her face until it settled on her lips. She tried to hide the fact that her breathing had picked up and that her chest was rising and falling a little quicker than it had been before, but she was sure he noticed, because his seemed to be doing the same.

He dipped his head a little, moving closer, still eyeing her lips. She returned the favor and stared right at his mouth, which was parted just enough that his perfectly straight row of bottom teeth was peeking out. He reached up ever so slowly and brushed the edge of her mouth with his thumb, wiping away a little chocolate syrup that had settled there.

She smiled up at him shyly, her skin tingling from his touch, expecting him to move away, but he didn't. Never in her life had she wanted so badly for a man to kiss her. And the way he was leaning in had her eyelids drooping until they were nearly closed.

His breath fell on her mouth then, and she licked her lips in preparation, which caused him to let out a whisper of a groan. Her stomach clenched at that sound, and she longed to find a way to get him to make it again. He was moving so slowly, she was tempted to lean in and put them both out of their misery, but the elevator doors opened again.

“Oh! I didn't know anyone was up here.”

Disappointment overcame Genevieve as Kurtis pulled away. She spotted Skylar walking toward them and tried to steady her rapid breathing.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” she told them as she eyed Kurtis.

“Not at all.” He gave Genevieve a look that made her insides turn to mush.

She wondered if they would get into any trouble for being up here. He had acted like it was okay, but now that one of the owners was standing before them, she braced herself to get a talking to.

But all Skylar said was, “Ice cream? I’m jealous.” Then she turned her attention to Kurtis. “Now that I find you here, can we have a word for a minute?”

He nodded and stood. “Of course.”

“I’ll have him back to you in a few minutes. Enjoy your ice cream.”

The two of them walked to the other end of the roof, and Genevieve couldn’t help but look their way, worried he might be getting reprimanded for bringing her there. But instead, they seemed to be in a deep conversation, and even though he said there was nothing going on between them, she noticed him squeeze Skylar’s hand at one point.

A few minutes later, Kurtis rejoined her while Skylar took a seat on the far end in a little private garden area. She looked deep in thought as she stared out across the tops of the downtown buildings.

“Is she okay?” Genevieve asked, genuinely concerned.

“She likes to come up here during the work day when she needs to clear her head.”

Genevieve took another bite of her delicious ice cream. “It’s a perfect place for that.”

“Yeah.”

“Are we in trouble for being up here?” she asked quietly.

“What? No. We’re fine. It wasn’t about that. It was about an employee who’s in a little trouble with the law.”

“Is it her brother, Gus?”

His brow furrowed. “Why would you ask that?”

“I heard some ladies at lunch yesterday saying that Gus got into some trouble at a bar the other day.”

Kurtis let out a deep breath, seeming annoyed. “Gossips.”

“Did he? Get into trouble?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s too bad.” She felt awful for whatever was happening with Gus. “I’m sure that’s so hard for Skylar and Sebastian.”

“I’m sure.”

He grew quiet after that, just eating the rest of his ice cream. When he finished, he stood and took their trash to dispose of it. “I have to get downstairs and work on a couple things, so I’m going to call it a day on the regatta. But you feel free to stay up here as long as you like and keep working.”

She was disappointed that he was departing so soon. “Okay. Will I see you tomorrow?”

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The sun sparkled in his eyes as he looked back at her. “Count on it.”

As he walked away, she thought about their almost kiss as well as the moment she’d seen between him and Skylar. She was probably making a big deal out of nothing. He’d already told her there was nothing going on with Skylar. More than anything, she wanted that to be true.

The connection she had with Kurtis was strong, and she hoped he felt it too. She wanted what she was feeling for him to be real, and for his feelings for her to be the same. But she had no patience for men who showed interest while not being completely truthful with her. After all her sister had gone through with Nolan’s lying and cheating ways, she needed total honesty in a relationship. Something told her Kurtis could be trusted, but she also had a feeling he was holding something back. She just wished she knew what it was.

FIFTEEN

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.”

Sebastian stared at the pastor with his mouth agape. Of course this was today’s sermon topic. An elbow jabbed his ribs, and he glanced over at Skylar, who simply nodded her head toward the pastor.

He gave her a not-so-gentle elbow to her ribs in return, which made her squeak and instantly cover her face in embarrassment.

Sebastian's eyes met his father's stern look, suddenly feeling very much like the child who used to sit in this very pew growing up.

In those days, all three of the Schultz children would have been sitting together. On this day, they were lacking Gus's presence. He'd been gone since Wednesday. No word of where he'd run off to. Sebastian was worried, but he knew Gus could take care of himself. Skylar, however, was overly anxious every day. She just wanted him to come home.

The pastor continued to speak about the slippery slope dishonesty can take a person down. "One lie leads to another to cover up the first and then another and another and so on. It's easy to lose track of the lies you've told."

Sebastian knew it was ridiculous pretending to be someone he wasn't. And deep down, he knew it was the wrong thing to do. Genevieve was a good person, and she deserved complete honesty from him. She deserved to know who he was. He'd thought about it from her perspective. How would he feel if he were on the other side of things? Confused. Hurt. Angry.

There was a very good chance that Genevieve would never forgive him for lying to her about this, and the odds of him losing out on perhaps the best relationship of his life were staggeringly high.

Yet when he thought back to his last relationship, he felt like he was somehow justified in this. Just like Genevieve, Serena had been sweet, funny, and beautiful, and he seriously thought she was different from the others. They'd grown close rather quickly and started dating exclusively within a month. He wasn't sure if he was simply blind from what he thought was love or completely gullible, because he believed everything she told him. She'd had him completely wrapped around her little finger.

The subtle changes should have cued him in to her true intentions. It wasn't the first time he'd been used for his money. She just turned out to be the most manipulative and deceitful of the bunch.

So, to get to know Genevieve without her knowing he had money was the only way he knew to see if what they had or could have was real. To really get to know a woman and not worry about whether she was only thinking about how much money was currently in his bank account.

But there was still the underlying worry that maybe she was like Serena and knew exactly who he was and how much he was worth financially. He didn't really believe that, but it was still there in the back of his mind. Serena had done that to him. She'd made him paranoid and closed off and doubting of every woman that came into his life.

And while he wasn't ready to tell Genevieve the truth yet, he still had a nagging feeling in his gut, and the pastor wasn't making it easy on him with this sermon.

Sebastian sank onto the sofa at their parents' house next to Skylar, who was flipping through TV channels.

"You aren't going to make me watch some girly Hallmark movie, are you?" he asked as he stole a pillow from behind her.

"Depends on what I find." She shuffled through and skipped past *The Princess Bride*.

"Hey!" he cried. "Turn it back."

"Nah." She kept clicking.

"Inconceivable," he cried.

She chuckled and then suddenly stopped clicking the remote.

He glanced up to see the movie Liar Liar starring Jim Carrey on the screen.

Skylar burst into giggles. “I think God is trying to tell you something today, Bash.”

He wrestled the remote from her hands and switched back to The Princess Bride. “We’re watching this.”

“Fine.” She settled back, and they watched for a while, quoting their favorite lines, laughing at all the funny parts.

When they reached the part where Westley explained how he had pretended to be the Dread Pirate Roberts, a few more giggles escaped from Skylar. And then when Prince Humperdinck told Buttercup that he would send his fastest ships to find her dear Westley, Skylar said, “Lying is the theme of the day, I think.”

Sebastian shook his head. “Okay, but Humperdinck was lying for horrible reasons. Because he’s a bad man, who’s trying to keep her away from her true love to have her for himself.”

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“And you’re doing it for honorable reasons?”

“At least I mean well. Our friendship is new. The money will overshadow it all. I want her to know me.”

Skylar rested her head on his shoulder. “I know, but she seems sweet. Different than Serena. I’m just afraid this is going to backfire and you’re both going to be hurt.”

“I’ll be okay. I’m a big boy.”

Skylar got quiet. “Do you think Gus is okay?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation. “He just needs his space.”

“What if he gets into more trouble while he’s wherever he is?”

“I don’t think he will, but we’ll deal with it if he does.”

“I wish Dad wouldn’t have said those things to him and got him so upset.”

“He needed to hear them. He can’t keep acting like this if he expects to be a part of this company.”

“But what about a part of this family?”

“He’ll always be part of the family. He knows we love him.”

“Does he?”

“Deep down, I know he does. He’s just struggling, I think. He’s trying to figure out who he is within the family and within the company. He’ll get there. And we’ll be here for him when he comes back.”

“What if he doesn’t come back before nasty Milton presses charges? That’s going to happen any day. Then there’ll be a warrant out for his arrest. That won’t be good. Especially if he left the state, right?”

“We don’t know he left the state.”

“We don’t know anything right now.”

He could tell she was getting all worked up, so he grabbed his phone and wrote a text to Gus from the both of them.

Sky and I want you to know that we love you and we’re here for you. Please let us know you’re all right.

He showed it to her, and she nodded in agreement, so he hit “send.”

“I hope he replies,” she said.

“I know. Me too.”

The chimes of the doorbell signaled the arrival of their dinner guests. Skylar practically jumped up from the sofa and walked quickly to the foyer. Sebastian followed at a slower pace and found Mom and Dad welcoming the Middlebury family—Wayne, Glenda, and their son, Francis, who was lifting Skylar off the ground in a hug.

Wayne was a distinguished looking gentleman. With his white hair and beard and dark, salt-and-pepper mustache, he resembled Sean Connery in The Hunt for Red October.

“Hello, Sebastian.” Glenda greeted him with a hug. Her neatly teased silver hair tickled his cheek as she squeezed him tightly. They were a very affectionate family.

“Hi, Mrs. Middlebury,” Sebastian replied.

She shushed him. “I told you, you’re too old to call me that anymore. Glenda is fine.”

“I know you said that, but it’s a hard habit to break.”

Glenda smiled. “I know. Sometimes I can’t believe you boys are all grown up. The time went by too fast.”

“Hey, Bash!” Franky left Skylar’s side and moved toward him with arms open.

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“Good to see you, man.” They hugged, and Sebastian patted his friend on the back.

The two had known each other since their private school days, and Franky was Sebastian’s dearest friend. It had been a while since they’d seen each other, and Franky was just home from a whirlwind tour of Europe with his most recent girlfriend.

“How was the trip?” Sebastian asked.

A shadow crossed over Franky’s face before he replied. “It was amazing. We stayed a month in France and then moved on to Italy.”

“I love Italy,” Skylar interjected. “Did you visit Positano? That’s my absolute favorite place to stay.”

“We didn’t make it that far. See, my girlfriend loved Italy too. She also loved Italian men.” He shook his head, looking rather annoyed. “One Italian man, actually. So much that she stayed there with him in Florence.”

“You’re kidding.” Sebastian looked at Skylar, who wore more of a pleased expression on her face than a look of sympathy for their friend.

“I wish I was. She didn’t care much about the fact that I had money. Apparently, I wasn’t romantic enough for her.” He shook his head. “Of course Italian guys seem romantic with that language of theirs. They could say they had to go to the bathroom and sound sexy.”

Sebastian and Skylar laughed.

“I’m sorry, man. At least she wasn’t out to get your money. That’s always been my problem.”

After a nice dinner filled with plenty of catching up and even more laughter, Dad and Wayne retired to the study. Sebastian was sure they were discussing Gus’s legal problems, because Wayne was a well-known attorney—the best in the business. This wasn’t the first time he’d helped get Gus out of a scrape, but it had been a long time since he’d needed to. Sebastian felt confident that Wayne would be able to help.

Mom and Glenda moved into the formal living room to chat, leaving the three kids alone.

While the housekeeper took care of the dinnertime dishes, the three of them headed out to sit on the pool deck with glasses of iced tea.

“So, how the heck are you guys?” Franky looked at Skylar as he pushed his honey blond hair back from his forehead. “How’s work, Miss Vice President?”

Skylar reacted with the biggest smile Sebastian had seen on her face since Gus left.

“Great.” She beamed. “I love it.”

“Vice President makes you seem so ...” Franky looked deep in thought.

“Important?” Sky offered.

He shook his head.

“Official? Prestigious? Awesome?” She tilted her head, waiting for him to reply.

“Grown up.”

Sebastian noticed her tilt her head shyly. Was she blushing?

“Sebastian met someone,” Skylar blurted, clearly deflecting Franky’s compliment—if that’s what he intended it to be.

Franky’s eyes widened and shot to Sebastian’s. “No way! Finally. Who is she?”

“A girl at work,” Skylar answered for him.

“Dating the employees. How taboo.”

“Not dating.” Sebastian spoke for himself for once. “Just met.”

“She doesn’t even know who he really is,” Skylar blurted.

“Sky!” Sebastian narrowed his eyes at her.

“It’s Franky. If anyone will understand, it’s him.”

“Understand what?” Franky looked intrigued.

Sebastian filled him in on the situation, and Franky started laughing and could not stop.

“Hey, come on, cut me some slack,” Sebastian said. “You know my track record with relationships.”

“Oh, man, I’m sorry.” Franky attempted to breathe. “I’ve never known you to get into a situation like this.”

“I know. It was impulsive and sudden and—”

“Stupid,” Skylar inserted.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes at her again.

“So, what’s she like?”

He was sure he got a far off, dreamy look in his eyes when he described her and her personality and the conversations they’d had so far. “She’s spectacular,” he concluded.

“Spectacular? Wow!” Franky nodded and smiled. “You’re in love already, my friend.”

He waved Franky off.

“I haven’t seen you like this in years. Not since your crush on Adelia.”

“Okay, Adelia and I were—and still are—friends.”

Skylar stared at Sebastian with her mouth hanging open. “You had a crush on Adelia?”

“No!” Sebastian laughed, partly to hide the fact that he had. “I was twenty-two, and she was seventeen. Way too young. Plus, I’d never date my sister’s friends. That just seems wrong.”

Something about that made Skylar glance down uncomfortably at the deck.

“Do you talk to Adelia much?” Franky asked Sky.

She looked up at him. “She actually called and left a message in the middle of the night. I don’t know why she can’t remember that California and Michigan are in different time zones.” Sky pulled out her phone then. “I didn’t listen to her message yet. Does that make me a bad friend?”

Franky grinned at her. “Yes.”

She scrunched her nose up at him, but smiled when he bumped her knee with his. When she opened her voicemail to listen to Adelia’s message, the smile on her face quickly faded away as she listened.

“He’s there,” she told them as she hung up.

“Who’s there?” Franky asked.

It dawned on Sebastian who she meant. “Gus is in California? With Adelia?”

Skylar nodded, tears filling her eyes. “I have to tell Mom and Dad.” She stood and started walking toward the house.

“Sky!” Sebastian called after her.

She looked back over her shoulder.

“I told you he’d be okay.”

Her mouth turned up in a little smile, and she brushed away a few tears as she walked inside.

He only hoped that was true.

SIXTEEN

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Not seeing Kurtis for several days felt strange. On Monday, he had texted to say he wouldn't be in to work until Friday, that he had some out of town meetings, and he'd apologized for leaving her without an assistant to help cross things off her notepad. And with that cute remark, he was totally forgiven.

She had crossed several items off of her list and was set to cross another off today—potential bands for the event. One was an 80s band, which she thought would be perfect during the day. The other band had a jazz vibe to go along with the Roaring Twenties theme for the gala. How fun it would be to dress up in 1920s outfits and dance. Maybe have someone there to teach some of the old dances too.

She'd never had such a strong desire to succeed in a job before. She had always been good at what she did, but something about this event made her want to prove to the Schultz family, and also to herself, that she could pull off an event this big on such a short timeline.

At one o'clock, she headed out for her first meeting. She walked out of the building and found Kurtis climbing out of a black sedan, much like the one she'd ridden in last week with Sebastian. He was in chinos again with a pale pink button-down this time, and she couldn't help but think that they matched today, since she was wearing a pink polka dot sundress on this sticky summer day.

He glanced up and made eye contact with her, and a smile spread across his face. "Hey."

"Hi."

He looked at her bag and then back to her face. “Where are you off to?”

“Meeting with some bands. Possible entertainment.”

He closed the door and patted on the roof, and the car drove away. “Want some company?”

She watched the vehicle move down the street. “Don’t you have work to do after being away all week?” She hadn’t meant to put so much emphasis on all week, but it just came out that way.

He stepped closer, wearing an amused expression on his face. “You missed me.”

“Pfft.”

“You did.” A smile spread across his face.

“You think a lot of yourself, don’t you?” she teased.

His mouth quirked. “I think a lot of you.”

His sudden boldness surprised her, and she pressed her lips together briefly, but nothing could contain her smile. “I guess you can tag along.” She played coy with him. “I could use an extra pair of ears.”

He tugged on his right ear. “They’re all yours.”

Every time she was with Kurtis, she became more and more comfortable with him, and she loved every minute of this new flirtatiousness between them.

They walked to her car, and she drove them across town to meet with the first band.

Marjorie had been helping with a few of the tasks in her notepad this week and gave her the list of possible bands in the area. She hoped this would be the one, because it was the only 80s band still available the weekend of the regatta.

When they arrived at the location, Kurtis was once again at her door, opening it for her, and holding open every other door in their path. As they walked along a hallway, the back of his hand brushed against hers, and goosebumps exploded across her skin. The instant reaction surprised her. Just like last week when he'd touched her mouth to clean off the chocolate. His nearness was distracting, and she tried to push aside her feelings so they could do the job they came there to do.

They walked down a long hallway until they reached an open room, where equipment was set up and some guys who looked a lot like an 80s hair band were hanging out. The guy behind the drums saw her enter the room and sucked air in through his lips, making a whistling sound.

"I'm Genevieve Willis. I spoke with one of you on the phone," she said to a man holding a guitar.

"Yeah, I'm Gunner, and these are the guys."

"Hey," one said.

"Hey," the drummer waved with his drumstick.

"Sup?" the other said.

Kurtis stepped up beside her, as if he was protecting her from them. "Let's hear what you've got."

"Cool," Gunner said.

Genevieve and Kurtis took a seat in some nearby chairs and listened while Gunner began to pick at a slow tune on his guitar and the drummer settled into a steady rhythm. It almost sounded like an 80s rock ballad, and she was about to tell Kurtis it sounded pretty good, when the drummer suddenly kicked up the rhythm, the guy on bass guitar started playing loudly, the keyboardist banged out a rapid beat, and Gunner went into a screeching loud song on his guitar while he sang—or rather yelled—equally loudly into the microphone.

Her hand flew to her mouth, and she was sure her eyes were popping out of her head. She almost covered her ears out of fear that her eardrums might burst. She glanced over at Kurtis, whose lips were pressed together, obviously trying not to laugh.

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She widened her eyes at him and shrugged her shoulders.

He stood and walked closer to the guys, holding a hand up. “Do you have any more mainstream 80s songs in your repertoire? You are an 80s band, right?”

Gunner nodded, his long hair falling forward over his shoulders. “80s heavy metal.”

Kurtis looked over his shoulder at Genevieve. She couldn’t believe her mistake. Marjorie hadn’t specified what type of 80s band they were, and Gunner hadn’t said so when they spoke on the phone.

“Okay, thanks, guys,” Kurtis told them. “We’ll let you know.”

He took Genevieve’s arm and quickly rushed her out of the room as the band began to play again.

She could not contain her laughter. “Oh my gosh. I’m sorry. I thought they were an 80s pop band.”

He laughed as they walked speedily to the exit with the screeching and screaming—er, singing—following them down the hallway. “I’d say they’re a little more Iron Maiden than Huey Lewis.”

A part of her felt embarrassed for this mistake, and if it had been anyone but Kurtis, she would have been seriously humiliated, but he had a way of making things seem not as bad as she’d built them up to be in her head.

“What’s the other band we’re meeting?”

She wrinkled her nose, wondering if maybe the next would be as bad as this one.
“Roaring Twenties.”

“Hopefully not actually roaring,” he joked.

She playfully smacked his arm. “I didn’t know, okay.”

“I’m messing with you. Anyone could’ve made that mistake.”

“That makes me feel better. Really. Thank you.”

He smiled sweetly at her. “No problem.”

“Okay, well, on to the next meeting then.”

She drove them not too far away to another location. This time it was in an individual’s home in a dedicated music studio in their basement. The room was open and spacious and clean, unlike the warehouse they had met the heavy metal band in.

The members of the band were all polite, and Genevieve was instantly comfortable with them. And when they started to play, she watched Kurtis, who was bobbing his head to the jazzy rhythm and tapping a foot on the floor, and they both nodded simultaneously.

They were perfect.

“We’ve heard enough.” Genevieve stood.

The lead singer stopped mid-chorus, and her expression fell. “We’ve got a couple

others if that's not what you're looking for."

"You're hired!"

After their outing, Genevieve drove them back to the Schultz Building. As they walked across the parking lot, Kurtis suddenly wound his fingers through hers. But before she had time to enjoy the feeling or register what was happening, he tugged her along the sidewalk away from the front entrance of the building.

"Where are we going?"

"Side entrance."

"What for?"

"Uh ..."

He glanced back over his shoulder and walked them a little faster.

She looked behind them and saw a couple men walking away from the building. One looked a lot like the founder of the company, Ephraim Schultz, whose picture she'd seen displayed in the lobby, but she was squinting into the sun and couldn't be sure.

"Is that—?"

She didn't get a chance to finish her question because Kurtis pulled her around the corner and headed for the loading docks to the rear of the manufacturing building.

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“Did you get a tour of the factory?” he asked.

“You mean where they make the chocolates?” she rasped.

“The very place.”

“No, I didn’t.” She was out of breath from trying to keep up with him and starting to sweat all over on this sticky hot day, which made her feel very unattractive.

He led her to a door beside a dock, where trucks bearing the Schultz Chocolate logo were parked. As she walked through the door he held open for her, she was instantly struck by the aroma of chocolate in the air.

“Oh my gosh.” She breathed in deeply. “I think I just gained ten pounds.” Her eyes found Kurtis’s. “How does anyone get work done in here? Don’t they just want to eat all the chocolate that passes in front of them? I know I would.”

Kurtis laughed. “Come on. I’ll show you around.” He made her stop at the edge of the work area for a few minutes while he spoke to a man who looked like the manager of the factory. He returned with what appeared to be a plastic shower cap, a hard hat, and a white jacket for them to wear.

“You look cute,” he told her once she’d put hers on.

“Oh, yes, it’s my best look ever.”

He chuckled and led her to check out some of the machines. “This is the first step in

the chocolate-making process. Roasting the cacao beans.” They watched for a while as he pointed out what the machines did, then he led her to the next area. “The beans then go through this process where the nib is separated from the dried bean. That’s where the unsweetened chocolate comes from.”

“Interesting.” She listened as he told her more about the machines and the process of mixing the unsweetened chocolate powder with milk, sugar, and cocoa butter to make crumbly chocolate, then mixing it up until it was smooth and flowing.

“The last step before putting it in the molds is tempering it by keeping it at a set temperature and constantly stirring. That’s what makes it shiny and firm to the touch.”

“You know a lot about this process.” She was thoroughly impressed with his knowledge of all things chocolate.

“I’ve been working here since I was a kid.”

Her eyebrow lifted. “Really?”

“Uh, well, I mean I was fresh out of college, so I was pretty much still a kid.”

“I didn’t know you’d worked here that long.”

“Over ten years.” He led her through the building to the area where the chocolate was packaged after the molding step. “We’ve got chocolate bars, and nibs and, of course, the famous truffles.”

“Of course.”

“Did you know ... Granny Schultz taught Ephraim how to make truffles when he was

a young boy, and he went on to make and sell them to put himself through college?”

“I didn’t. And he built this whole company from there?”

“His dad actually started the company, then when he got sick, Ephraim took over and used his business savvy to take Schultz Chocolate from a small, struggling company to what it is today.”

“That’s amazing.”

He nodded, his lips pressed together as he smiled proudly.

“What is it about this company that you love so much?” she asked.

“Everything, really. The history. The people. The ... Schultz family, and the relationship they have with their employees. It’s like a great big family here.”

“Sebastian said the same thing.” She smiled. “I have felt very welcomed by everyone. By the Schultzes. And by you.”

He seemed to get quiet for a few moments, like he was deep in thought, trying to work something out.

“What is it?”

“I’m just glad you started working here.” He gave her a cute closed-mouth smile.

“So am I.”

They came full circle to the entrance of the factory again and removed their white jackets, hats, and caps. Kurtis waved at the man he’d spoken to before as he left the clothing on a table. He opened the exit door, but didn’t hold it for her this time. He stepped through first and peeked back and forth before motioning for her to follow him.

She wasn’t sure why that bothered her. He was acting a little strange. But then he led her to the front of the building again, and they walked in like normal.

“Did he die?” Genevieve asked, thinking back to the story about Ephraim.

“Who?”

“Ephraim’s father.”

“Yeah. He had lung cancer and passed away before he got to see all of his son’s success.”

“That’s so sad.”

“I’m sure he’s looking down from Heaven with great pride.”

She liked that he had said that.

“You go on ahead,” Kurtis told her. “I have one quick thing that requires my

attention, and then I'll be up."

"Uh, okay." She wondered what thing he had to do.

"See you in a few."

She watched him walk down the hallway toward the executive elevator—the one they had taken the other day to the roof. She wondered why he kept using that elevator? It seemed there was a lot about him and his work there that she didn't know yet. She was sure she'd learn over time. Maybe since he'd been there for ten years already, he had earned the right to certain perks. Maybe he was considered a prized employee—Employee of the Year, like he'd joked.

She let out a sigh and took the plain old employee elevator to the marketing floor. This time when she reached her office, there was a new name plate on the door that read "Genevieve Willis. Event Coordinator, Schultz Foundation." It made her giddy to finally see that there.

And then she noticed a small white box in the center of her desk with a shiny gold bow on top. She lifted the top of the box to find a brand new iPhone within.

"You said you didn't have a smart phone," Kurtis said from the doorway.

She gave him a look of disapproval. "I didn't say that so you'd go buy me one."

"I know you like your old fashioned ways." He walked over to stand beside her and tapped his finger against the notepad on her desk.

A giggle escaped her. "Yes, I do."

"But the company likes everyone to have them."

“Oh.” It disappointed her a little that the phone hadn’t actually come from Kurtis.

“Look under the phone.”

She lifted the phone and a layer of tissue paper to reveal a sturdy looking phone case in pink with the silhouette of a cowgirl barrel racing.

“That’s from me,” he told her. “I hope the color’s okay.”

“It’s perfect.” Nobody had ever given her such a thoughtful gift. Kurtis made her feel so special, and before she thought about what she was doing, she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him, resting her cheek against his chest.

He nearly stumbled back, but then his arms moved around her shoulders and held her to him. She thought she felt him kiss the top of her head softly, but she couldn’t be sure.

“I’m glad you like it, Genevieve.” His voice was deeper than usual and vibrated through her body.

“Thank you, Kurtis.” She pulled back and let go, even though she didn’t want to. Being in his arms felt good. It felt right.

But when she looked at him again, his expression wasn’t what she expected. He seemed uncomfortable, awkward even, and she wondered if she’d crossed a line past professional that she shouldn’t have.

SEVENTEEN

The hug had surprised him. He hoped she would like the phone case. He'd wanted it to be more personal so she would know he'd been paying attention to every little thing she had told him about her life. But he hadn't expected her to wrap her arms around him like that. It was probably crossing the line for him to inhale the coconut scent of her hair and press a quick, soft kiss atop her head, but he'd done it anyway. Because having her in his arms, holding her close, felt so right. So natural. He never wanted to let go.

And then she'd called him Kurtis, and their sweet moment was over as quickly as it began.

It had been a close call earlier, seeing his father and Wayne Middlebury walking out of the building, and he'd totally panicked, knowing they couldn't get by without Dad seeing him. That would've been the end of it. He wouldn't have been able to explain so she'd understand. He would've been outed as the liar he was.

She seemed to notice his awkwardness after their hug and moved to sit at her desk. He wished he could tell her that the hug wasn't what made him uncomfortable. The hug was very comfortable, and he knew he'd never forget her warmth or the way her body fit perfectly against his.

Genevieve opened her notepad.

Gosh, he loved her little notepad. He took a seat across from her. "Cross anything else off?"

She took out a pen and made a line through two items. “Meet with 80s band.” She looked up at him. “We know how that went.” Then she marked off another. “Meet with 20s band. Done.”

“They were really good. I love the Roaring Twenties theme. It’s great, Genevieve.”

She straightened her back confidently. “Thank you.”

“So, we’re going all out with this, huh? Flapper dresses and vests and waistcoats?”

“Doesn’t it sound amazing? I think it will be a big draw for the gala. People are used to black tie for these galas, but this puts such a fun spin on it. Can you imagine everyone dancing the night away to that band?”

He shook his head and let out a sigh without realizing he was doing it.

She gave him a curious look. “What was that for?”

“You’re like a breath of fresh air blowing through these offices, Genevieve Willis. I think we needed you, and we didn’t even know it.”

His words brought color to her cheeks, and she smiled shyly. “If only it was cold air.” She fanned herself with the notepad. “Is it extra hot in here, or is it just me?”

He thought it was just him and his reaction to her, but she was right, it was starting to feel a little close. “I’ll go check on things. When I get back, I’m helping you get your phone set up.”

She rolled her eyes as he walked out of the office, which was the cutest thing he’d ever seen.

As he walked along the hallway, an uneasiness settled over him about the fundraiser. He would never be able to attend without being recognized. He had two options. Tell her before the regatta or find a reason not to be there. He knew deep down which option was the right one.

As he approached the marketing cubicles, he saw a group of the employees gathered and noticed they were fanning themselves. He rolled his sleeves up as he approached, and they set their fans down, scrambling to look like they were working.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Schultz,” a young man greeted him.

“Good afternoon, Gordy. Anybody know what’s up with the air in here?” Sebastian asked.

“Air conditioning’s out in the entire building,” Gordy explained. “Maintenance has been called, and it’s being taken care of, but it’s been getting hotter and hotter as the day goes on. It’s like heat indexes over a hundred today.”

“Why don’t you all go home for the day,” Sebastian told them.

“Oh, it’s no problem, Mr. Schultz. We can take the heat,” Gordy replied, which got him a smack on the arm from the girl standing behind him.

“I insist. Go home and cool off.”

“Thanks, Mr. Schultz,” they all said as they began gathering their belongings.

Sebastian walked to the receptionist’s desk. The employees followed not long after, all walking past him quietly until they were down the hallway, and then they started chatting and laughing together. It was clear they thought they had to be professional around him, and he hated how formal they were. If Gus had been there, they would

have acted completely different. Everyone liked Gus. He was the fun one who joked around with them.

He turned his attention to the receptionist. “Carol, you’re free to go home for the day. It’s way too hot in here. And can you call Holly and have her let the other departments know they should go as well?”

“Yes, Mr. Schultz.”

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He wished he had a similar rapport as Gus had with their employees. He used to be more like that. When he was younger, he was always hanging around the office or the factory. People knew and liked him. But ever since Serena had decimated his heart, something in him had closed off, which had earned him the reputation he now had. Only people who'd worked at the company for more than five years knew what Sebastian was once like.

It was distracting sitting across the desk from Genevieve. About an hour ago, after she'd cracked the window and insisted they stay and get a little more work done, she had slipped her feet out of her sandals and rested them on the corner of her desk. Sebastian pretended to be working on his laptop, which he really should have been doing, but his gaze kept traveling to her bare feet and along the length of her calves to where the bottom hem of her flowy pink sundress with the little white polka dots rested just above her knees. It got even worse when she ran her fingers through her hair and twisted it up in a bun at the nape of her neck, securing it with a couple pencils stabbed through from opposite sides. Little wisps of hair now hung around her face and along the back of her neck, some sticking to her perspiration.

Is it getting hotter in here? He wasn't sure he could stand much more.

When she picked up her water bottle and pressed it to her full lips as she took a drink, he knew he was done for the day. He stood and pushed the chair out quickly.

"Time to go home," he announced.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. "But we still have twenty minutes."

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m melting in here.”

She gave a knowing nod and started packing away her things.

“I’ll walk you out.” He said it before he remembered the possibility of someone seeing him, but it was too late to take it back now.

“Thanks.”

As they made their way out of the building, he was happy to see that it was pretty much a skeleton crew since most people had been sent home from the overheated building. He held the door for her and was feeling relieved that they were almost in the clear, when he spotted Franky walking toward the building with Skylar.

“Hey, man.” Franky held his hand out for a fist bump. “Thought you’d be tucked away in your office like always.”

Sebastian was frozen in place, unsure what to say. Franky knew the situation, but he didn’t know this was the girl they’d told him about. He glanced over at Genevieve, who looked from Franky to him and back again.

“Hi, I’m Genevieve.”

Franky’s lips turned up in a smile, and he took her already outstretched hand and gave the back of her hand a kiss, which made her let out the most adorable giggle.

“Wow, the men at this company sure are gentlemen. Kurtis is always holding doors for me. And now this.”

Skylar chuckled.

Sebastian rolled his eyes at his friend. “This is Francis Middlebury, a close friend of the Schultz family.”

Franky’s eyebrow lifted, and then he met Sebastian’s eyes with an expression of understanding. “Yeah, I don’t work here. I’m a friend. And Kurtis here is always a gentleman.”

Genevieve smiled at Sebastian then looked at Franky again. “It’s very nice to meet you, Francis.”

“You too,” he replied. “Please, call me Franky.”

“Okay, Franky,” she said with a smile.

“What are you two up to now? Sky has to pick something up, then we’re headed to dinner. Care to join?”

Sebastian thought Genevieve looked a smidge uncomfortable, but he couldn’t be sure. “If you already have plans, it’s fine,” he reassured her.

“I kind of do.”

“Then we’ll try another time.”

She turned into Sebastian a little, lowering her voice to speak privately to him, and he loved the intimacy of it.

“I’m supposed to go to my mom’s tonight, but I should still have time to go to dinner.”

He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “If you already have dinner plans with her,

that's okay. Another time.”

“No, not dinner, just a visit. I’m mostly going to check on Charisma.”

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“We don’t have to spend a long time at dinner if that’s what you want.”

She nodded then turned to Skylar and Franky. “Okay. Dinner sounds great.”

Their entire exchange gave Sebastian a glimpse of what the future could be like for them—the closeness, the understanding, the two of them in each other’s confidence. He wanted it all.

“I’ll only be a few minutes,” Skylar announced as she walked toward the building.

“We’re not taking your car, are we?” Sebastian called after her.

“Yes!”

Franky let out a little whistle as he spun around. “I love her car.” He looked at Genevieve. “Have you seen it? Sexy red Porsche 911 S.” He pointed toward the car parked across the street.

“My legs are too long for the back seat,” Sebastian complained.

“I can sit in the back with Genevieve if you want.”

His eyes bored into Franky’s.

“Or not.” Franky burst out laughing.

“So, you’re all good friends,” Genevieve said. It wasn’t a question. More of an

observation. Like she was trying to piece together the relationship between him, Franky, and Skylar.

“Yeah, good friends,” Sebastian spoke before Franky could say anything.

Skylar came out of the building a few minutes later as promised.

As they walked to her car, disappointment settled over Sebastian. He wanted Genevieve to get to know his family and friends, but not under these circumstances. Circumstances that he’d put them in by lying about who he was. He’d dug himself this giant hole that kept getting bigger. And now that Franky was involved too, he felt like he was sinking further and further into the lie.

He wanted Genevieve to know him as Sebastian and be close with his loved ones. He wondered how she would react if he told her the truth. Would she be very angry? Anyone who was lied to would be unhappy about it, but was she the kind of person who held a grudge? Or would she listen to his reasons and understand where he was coming from? He didn’t know her well enough to know that, but he prayed she’d be the latter.

EIGHTEEN

Genevieve hadn’t laughed so hard in a long time. Franky was a very funny guy, and she could see why Kurtis liked him. He was constantly joking around, and it was obvious he was the life of the party. She also suspected that Skylar had a thing for him. Maybe Franky didn’t notice the way Skylar looked at him, but Genevieve certainly did.

Skylar’s car was amazing. Smooth, supple leather seats with that new car smell permeating the space, air conditioning that seemed to immediately cool them—maybe because the outside air was so stifling—and this car had some serious

horsepower.

She continued to wonder about the dynamic between the three of them. They seemed to be good friends. The kind of friends that were comfortable around each other. Kurtis didn't seem the least bit concerned about class, considering the car they were riding in and the very wealthy woman driving it. She had no idea what Franky's situation was or how he knew the Schultz family, but their association made her assume he came from money too. Maybe that wasn't correct, but it was her initial judgment.

Kurtis had been right when he said his legs were too long for the back seat. The seats were tiny, probably more suitable for children or petite women like Genevieve. His knees were bent way up to his chest, and no matter how much shifting he did, he couldn't seem to find a comfortable position. He'd taken the seat behind Skylar, and she'd moved forward to make as much room for him as possible, but it didn't help much. He shifted once more, and his knee leaned across the center console and rested against Genevieve's.

She looked over at him.

"Sorry. It's a tight fit back here."

"I don't mind." She could have angled her legs toward the side of the car to give him more room, but she didn't. She wanted to feel his strong thigh pressed against hers.

He moved his hand and rested it on his knee, millimeters away from her bare leg. More than anything, she wanted to lay her hand over his. Instead, she placed it on her own knee next to his, giving him the opportunity if he wanted it. She was sure her motive was obvious, and she felt a little foolish for doing it. But then she felt his pinky press against the side of hers. Just the warmth of that simple touch erased her misgivings. She didn't look at him or their hands. She simply stayed still to see what

he'd do next.

Her eyes fixed on the passing landscape, and she was beginning to think she was being foolish again since he hadn't moved. She was sure he liked her. They had this flirtatious thing going on between them. And he'd nearly kissed her last week. But was she making more of this than there really was? Maybe he'd accidentally brushed her finger with his.

Just as she was about to move her hand away, his pinky gently skimmed over the top of hers and on over the back of her hand as the rest of his fingers followed, gently caressing her skin, softly trailing across her hand to her wrist and back again, leaving chills in their wake. As his hand slid over hers, she lifted her fingers, intertwining them with his, and he folded his fingers into her palm, holding onto her hand and gently moving his thumb back and forth along the side.

She could barely breathe. His hand was so warm atop hers. She turned her eyes away from the window and dared to make eye contact. And when she saw the tender look in his eyes, she knew it wasn't all her.

She was falling for Kurtis. Falling hard. And she was certain he was falling for her too.

The restaurant was not what Genevieve expected. She'd pictured something a little fancier, with more expensive decor and tastes, but when they stopped in front of a little building overlooking the lake, she couldn't have been more surprised or pleased. Sunset Grill. She loved it already.

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“Have you ever been here?” Kurtis asked her.

She shook her head. “I didn’t even know it existed.”

“Be prepared for greatness,” Franky announced as he offered his hand to help Genevieve out of the car. “They have the best fish tacos on the planet.”

She accepted his assistance and climbed out, looking over the small building with cedar shake siding and a welcoming front porch.

Kurtis came up beside her. “They have a lot of other menu options too.”

Franky leaned in and whispered, “Get the fish tacos.”

“I think she can make up her own mind.” Kurtis rested his hand on her lower back and guided her toward the entrance.

The atmosphere was quaint and rustic. Booths for four along the sides of the dining room. Tables arranged in the remaining space for more guests. There was also another seating area toward the back with a wall of windows that looked out onto an open deck for more dining options.

“This place is great,” Genevieve said.

“It’s our favorite,” Skylar told her.

“I gathered that.”

“Come on.” Skylar took her wrist and gave it a soft tug. “I have to powder my nose.”

Genevieve gave Kurtis a smile over her shoulder as she followed Skylar into the ladies room. She didn’t really have to use the restroom, so she washed her hands and waited.

When Skylar came out of the stall, she walked to the mirror, washed her hands, then pulled a makeup pouch from her Louis Vuitton purse. She removed a compact from within and began touching up her makeup.

Genevieve smiled as she watched her. “I didn’t think you actually meant you were going to powder your nose.”

Skylar laughed. “This heat is melting the makeup off my face.” She glanced over at Genevieve and grunted. “How do you look like that in this humidity?”

She looked into the mirror then back at Skylar. “Like what?”

“All fresh-faced and natural. You are seriously perfect.”

Genevieve blushed. Nobody had ever told her that before. She was much more used to her mother telling her she needed to wear more makeup and cover up imperfections or blemishes.

“I’m far from perfect. I don’t wear a lot of makeup. Never have.” She watched Skylar apply a lovely warm peach blush to her cheeks. “You look nice.”

Skylar moved closer, swirled a brush in the compact, and held it toward Genevieve’s cheek. “May I?”

“Sure.” She’d never really done makeovers growing up. What little experience she

had with makeup was from playing around with it or trying to copy Rhonda. It was kind of nice to have someone who knew what they were doing.

She watched as Skylar gently brushed the smallest hint of color onto her cheeks. “I like it.”

“Looks good on you.” Skylar snapped the blush closed and tossed it in her bag. “Although, you really didn’t need it. Seriously, you have this natural glow to your skin. I’m totally jealous.”

“You’re too sweet,” Genevieve told her as she glanced at her reflection again.

“Here.” Skylar handed her a tube of Chanel lipstick. “Put this on after we eat. He won’t be able to resist.” She winked.

Flustered, Genevieve nearly dropped the tube when Skylar gave it to her. She was sure the blush in her cheeks was even darker than before. “Kurtis and I are coworkers ... and friends.”

Skylar actually snorted at that. “And I’m the vice president of Disneyland.” She whisked her purse from the counter and headed back toward the table.

If it was obvious to Skylar that there was something going on with her and Kurtis, it might be obvious to other coworkers, which made her nervous. She didn’t want anything to affect her status at the company, no matter how much she liked this man.

Skylar led her up a set of stairs into a private room overlooking the lake. The guys were already there, talking and laughing, and both stood when the girls approached. The view from the room was beautiful with windows all along the side of the room that faced the water.

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Genevieve walked closer to the windows, and her gaze traveled past the roof that covered the open seating area downstairs and on to Lake Michigan beyond. She felt Kurtis's presence before he spoke.

"Do you like it?"

She nodded. "I didn't expect a private room with a view like this. It's beautiful."

"We ..." He motioned over his shoulder toward Skylar. "The Schultz's own this restaurant."

"Really?" That wasn't what she was expecting him to say.

"What? Is that so hard to believe?"

"It just seems ... modest for people who have so much money."

He didn't reply, and when she looked over, his brow was furrowed.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"Is that really what you think? That people with a lot of money only buy the most expensive things? Fine dining all the time at high class restaurants or something?"

"I didn't mean—"

"You don't think they can be real people, like you ... and me ... and just want to

spend their money on a really good burger?”

“They can spend their money on whatever they want. And I know they’re people too. I’m not saying they’re some otherworldly beings, but their world is a lot different than yours and mine, that’s for sure.”

“You’re generalizing.”

He seemed very worked up over this, and she couldn’t quite understand why.

“You don’t know anything about my financial situation,” he said, “so you can’t make a statement like that, and you shouldn’t judge the Schultz family for being wealthy.”

“I’m not judging. I was just surprised that a place like this was even on their radar.”

“That feels like judgment.”

“Well, it’s not.”

He walked toward the table, and she followed.

“Why does it seem like you’re mad at me?” She was more than a little bit confused. So far, she’d felt like she could be honest with him about anything, and she hadn’t held back her thoughts. So, why when she’d told him her reaction to this place had it set him off in this way?

A waiter arrived at the table at that moment, so she sat down across from Kurtis, who was now staring at his menu. She watched him while the others ordered, and when he didn’t make eye contact, she gave the menu a quick glance so she’d know what to get when the waiter asked her.

She settled on the fish tacos after all.

“Yes!” Franky nearly cheered. “You won’t be sorry.”

Kurtis ordered a burger and was mostly silent during the meal, which saddened her. She had put him in a bad mood, and she wanted to talk more about this and make it right.

When the meal was over, they walked out to Skylar’s car. But instead of getting in, Skylar tossed the keys to Kurtis.

“Will you take it back for me?” she asked him.

“Sure. What are you guys doing?”

“We’re hanging out at the house for a while. I’ll have Gerard send a car later.”

“Okay.”

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Genevieve watched as Skylar and Franky began walking along a boardwalk that led through a woodsy path. “Where are they going?”

“Schultz Cottage on the lake. It’s a short walk from here.”

She was thinking how nice that must be to have enough money to have a house on Lake Michigan, but she was afraid to say that. She was still unsure of why he’d gotten so upset about her comment earlier, and she didn’t want to upset him further.

He walked to her side and opened the door for her. At least he was still a gentleman. She climbed in and, remembering the lipstick, pulled out the tube and applied it quickly, glancing in the visor mirror before Kurtis got in to make sure it looked good. She pressed her lips together and put the lipstick away just as he got settled in, and he noticed her putting it away.

His eyes met hers and then dropped to her lips. His nostrils flared a little before he started the car and the engine revved to life. She expected him to put the car into gear, but he didn’t. He simply turned on the air conditioning and shifted to face her.

“I’m sorry about before. The Schultz family gets judged unfairly sometimes. Yes, they have a lot of money, but they’re not what you think. They’re good people. Down to earth people.”

“I never said they weren’t good people. I said I didn’t expect them to own a place like this. I like Skylar. A lot. I can tell she’s down to earth and fun and sweet. I feel like we could be good friends.”

“You will be.”

“Sebastian seemed the same. He was nothing but warm and friendly to me. Maybe a little too friendly at times, but—”

“What does that mean? Did he try something with you?” The muscles in his jaw twitched.

“He was just flirty, but I wasn’t interested in him.” She looked straight into his eyes. “I’m interested in someone else.”

“Are you?” He swallowed hard.

“I like this guy at work. He’s sweet and handsome and a true gentleman.”

“Oh, yeah?” His lips turned up in the cutest smile.

“I don’t want a guy with billions of dollars,” she told him. “I wouldn’t know what to do with all that money, anyway. I’m sort of a simple girl, if you hadn’t noticed. I don’t need for much. It’s how I was raised.”

He grew quiet and distant again. She wasn’t sure what she’d said this time.

“Can I show you?” she asked.

He looked at her then. “Show me what?”

“Where I was raised.”

NINETEEN

He hadn't meant to get so upset with her. She'd just been sharing her honest thoughts, and he loved that she felt comfortable enough with him to do that, but her nonchalant comment about wealthy people had made him feel very defensive of himself and his family. Sure, his reaction was probably confusing to her, considering he was supposed to be living on a public relations salary, but he couldn't help it.

And then she'd said she didn't want a man with money. What was he supposed to do with that? He wanted to see where this relationship was going, but what if she really didn't want all the negative things that came with a life like his? And there were plenty. It wasn't all glitz and glamour, though there were moments like that too. But there was also judgment and prejudice on the part of others. There were times when it was impossible to tell someone's true motives, fear of being taken advantage of, and difficulty making real friends because of it. What if she didn't want all that?

He drove along the highway leading south out of Grand Rapids. He was surprised she'd invited him along. It seemed like the kind of thing reserved for someone you were dating, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity to see where she'd grown up.

After driving through another small town called Hastings, they made a few turns on rural roads, even passing a black horse-drawn buggy, carrying an Amish family to their home. They really were in the middle of nowhere.

"It's just up here on the right." Genevieve's lovely voice cut through the silence.

When they pulled into the driveway of her parents' farm, a short heavy-set woman emerged from inside, smoothing her dark blonde hair back from her face before straightening out the apron she was wearing. Her eyes widened as she clasped her hands together and took in the Porsche they'd arrived in.

Sebastian got out of the car and walked around to help Genevieve out. She took his hand when offered and gave him a sweet smile when she stood. He wanted to keep

holding onto her hand as he had on the way to the restaurant earlier, but she let go and went to hug her mother.

“Oh, my.” Genevieve’s mom admired the car again. “Fancy.”

“Yeah, it’s a nice car, Mom.” Genevieve seemed to dismiss it quickly.

Her mom looked over at him. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

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“Mom, this is Kurtis ...” Genevieve looked suddenly flabbergasted. “I just realized I don’t know your last name.”

He thought quickly, and decided to give his mother’s maiden name. “Fraser.”

“Kurtis Fraser,” she told her mom. “This is my mom, Ida.”

Sebastian held his hand out to her mother. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Willis.”

She shook his hand. “Nice to meet you too. It’s been a long time since Genny brought someone home.”

“Mom.” Genevieve gave her a look. “We work together.”

“Mhmm.”

Genevieve rolled her eyes.

“Why don’t you come in and cool off for a bit before you go see the horses,” Ida suggested. “Can I get you something to drink, Kurtis?”

“Whatever you’ve got is fine,” he replied.

Genevieve walked in front of him, following along behind her mother, and he couldn’t help but stare at the wispy hairs sticking to the back of her neck or the pale freckles sprinkled there. He suddenly imagined taking hold of her shoulders and pulling her back against him so he could brush his lips against that spot and taste the

saltiness there.

“I’ve got some cranberry juice ...” Ida looked back at Genevieve and lowered her voice. “For my UTI.”

“Mom,” she whispered.

That did it. Fantasy over.

“And there’s water,” Ida declared.

“Water’s fine,” he said.

Genevieve glanced back over her shoulder as they entered the house and whispered, “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head and waved away her concerns.

They entered through the back door that went through a mud room, and he took in the row of well-worn boots, Carhartt coats hanging on pegs along the wall, and a bin of work gloves.

Genevieve paused and looked at the same for a few beats before continuing on into the house.

Noticing a small rug with a few pairs of shoes on it, he asked, “Should I take my shoes off?”

“Of course not, sweetie,” Ida replied. “Come on in.”

The mud room opened up into the kitchen, where he noticed a sink filled with soapy

water, a pile of unwashed dishes to the left of the sink, and more dishes drying in a rack to the right. A wonderful aroma filled the room, and the timer on the oven went off right then.

Ida went to the stove and silenced the timer. “Baking up some cookies for the moms’ group at church.”

Sebastian watched as Genevieve put on some oven mitts and removed the tray of sugar cookies for her mother.

“Is that new lipstick you’re wearing?” her mother asked. “You don’t usually wear pink. It doesn’t always work with your skin tone.”

Genevieve did not reply to her mother’s observations or opinions. Instead, she reached for one of the cookies, but her mom pushed her arm aside before she could get it.

“A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.” Her mom looked her over. “Looks like you’ve been eating well lately.”

Genevieve rolled her eyes again and walked to the refrigerator, removing a jug of water, and pouring them each a glass.

He couldn’t understand how she wasn’t upset with her mother’s comments. He was upset for her, but it wasn’t his place to defend her. Especially in the place where she grew up. He had a feeling she’d been rolling her eyes at her mother for a very long time.

“You should really clean out the mud room, Mom.”

“It’s fine as it is,” her mom snapped.

“It’s like a shrine in there.”

“The time isn’t right yet.”

There was no eye rolling this time, and Sebastian could feel the tension hanging in the room. Though she hadn’t shared with him, it was obvious that Genevieve’s dad was no longer around.

Ida motioned for them to follow her into the living room, and she settled into a recliner, turning the already-running television to the local news. “Did you see that story this morning about the guy who left his dog in the car in this heat?”

“You know I don’t watch the news, Mom,” Genevieve replied. “What happened? Did the dog die?”

“A person walking by saw and called the police. They got the dog out in time.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe some people. I’m always hearing stories about kids and animals dying when people do that. It’s like leaving them in an oven.” She took a sip of water.

“Nice place you have here,” Sebastian said.

“Thank you.”

“Seems like a peaceful area to live in. How long have you been here?” he asked.

“Since before Genny’s sister, Rhonda, was born. Going on thirty-five years now, I’d say. Where do you live, Kurtis?”

“In Grand Rapids. I have a place on the east side.”

“Very nice. So, you must do well for yourself then.”

“Mom,” Genevieve cut in. “That’s his business.”

Her mom shrugged her shoulders innocently. “Drives a nice car. Has his own place. I’d say he’s a successful man.”

There was that eye-rolling again, which he was starting to find adorable.

“Anyway ...”

He could see she was anxious to change the subject.

“I read an article about the fundraiser for the Schultz Foundation, Genny. Is that the thing you’re in charge of?”

“Yes, Mom. It’s a regatta.”

“Well, that’s nice. You always try to do too much yourself, though.”

“She’s doing an amazing job,” Sebastian told her. “You should be very proud.”

Ida’s appreciative smile suddenly shifted, and she began eyeing him strangely. “Have you been working at the Schultz company for long, Kurtis?”

“Ten years.”

“Hmm. And you like it there?”

“I do. It’s a good company to work for.”

Her eyes narrowed a little as she looked at him. It was like she was trying to figure something out, and it was a little unsettling.

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Genevieve must have sensed it, because she hopped up and motioned for Sebastian to follow her. “Okay, we’re going to see Charisma now. I’ll come let you know when we’re going.”

“All right. Have fun,” her mom said.

“We will.”

Genevieve rushed ahead toward the exit, and Sebastian sped up to follow her.

They stepped out into the heat, and when they were clear of the house, she looked over at him.

“I am so sorry about my mom. She’s ... opinionated. And I told you she thinks I need to lose some weight.”

“I caught that. And she couldn’t be more wrong.”

She smiled over at him. “Thanks.”

“She also gives me a hard time about not watching the news or reading the paper. I’m sorry, but I have a lot of stuff to worry about, and maybe I should be keeping up with the state of the world more, but by the time I’m done with work every day, I want to unplug and unwind, and turning on the news or reading her beloved newspaper is the last thing on my mind. Most of it is just too depressing.”

“So, she’s a news buff.”

“Obsessed with the news. Reads the paper religiously. They’ve had the Grand Rapids Press and The New York Times delivered out here in the boonies for years.”

He laughed at that. “That’s kind of impressive. It’s good to read and be in the know.”

“I know. I should be better. Do you watch the news?”

“Yes.”

“Read the paper?”

“Every day.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course you do.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re in public relations. You need to keep up with what’s going on in the world and in the area, right?”

He laughed. “And for general knowledge.”

She smiled over at him as they walked into one of the barns, and she led him past a few empty stalls to two on the end that contained horses.

“This is Buddy, Rhonda’s horse.” She patted him on the side of his shiny copper coat as she passed by on her way to the next stall. Her hand gracefully lifted to caress her horse’s reddish-brown face. “Hey, girl.”

The horse came forward, head over the gate, and nuzzled Genevieve’s cheek, which had her smiling, and Sebastian found her even more beautiful than he had before.

“This is Charisma,” she announced, then leaned closer to her horse and whispered, “What do you say, girl? Should we take Kurtis riding?”

Charisma whinnied.

“Do you ride?” she asked him.

He’d been riding horses since he was a little kid, but there was no way he was going to tell her that and miss out on her teaching him how. “A few times, but you can show me what to do.”

“Gladly.” She worked to get Charisma and Buddy all saddled up and ready to go, showing him what to do, then once they were on the horses, she gave him basic instructions on how to get the horse to move.

He listened intently, even though he already knew it all, and nodded with each thing she told him. Her voice was sweet and soothing and more than a little sexy. He could have sat there all day listening to her talk.

Genevieve began to direct Charisma toward a long lane that led along the edge of a cornfield. Sebastian followed on Buddy. It had been a while since he’d ridden. He and his siblings used to have horses of their own growing up, but they’d sold them as they all got older and into other activities. But still, he loved them. They were the most beautiful creatures in the world.

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His eyes settled on Genevieve—another beautiful creature—just as she looked back at him. “Catch up,” she told him.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, giving Buddy a little tap with his heels to get him to trot past her.

“Hey!” she cried.

He heard her laugh, and then she was beside him with Charisma, trotting along the path.

“I told you I’ve done this a few times.” He gave her a smile as he sat firmly in the saddle and signaled with his legs for Buddy to change his gait to a walk.

Genevieve did the same. “I’m impressed. You’re either a natural or you’ve ridden more than you’re admitting, because it usually takes practice to get a horse to make such a smooth transition for a beginner rider.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

Her nose scrunched up like it so often did, and he was beginning to understand that it meant she was annoyed or disappointed.

“What?” he asked.

“You do that a lot,” she said.

“Do what?”

“I’m trying to get to know you, and whenever I ask you something about yourself, you dodge the question or shrug it away like you just did.”

“You didn’t ask me a question. If you want to know something, ask.”

“How long have you been riding?”

“Since I was a kid, but my parents sold my horse years ago, and I haven’t ridden since.”

“How come you didn’t tell me that earlier, before I babbled on and on about how to ride a horse?”

“I wanted to hear you tell me how to do it. I like the sound of your voice.”

A blush colored her cheeks as a shy smile spread across her face. “Was that so hard?”

“Anything else you’d like to ask me?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Are you originally from Grand Rapids?”

“Yes. Born and raised.”

“Did you keep it there?”

“Keep what where?”

“Your horse. In GR?”

He was amused by the way she jumped from subject to subject. “Yeah. We boarded it at a stable.”

She smiled. “I got Charisma when I was eight. She was just a filly then.” She touched Charisma’s side. “We’ve been through a lot together, haven’t we, girl?”

“How about Buddy?” he asked.

“Buddy’s been around for about twenty years. My sister, Rhonda, didn’t take to horses like I did, though. But I was getting all this attention barrel racing, and she liked being the center of attention, so she begged for a horse and riding lessons. It didn’t last very long. She wasn’t devoted to it like I was. Poor Buddy didn’t get much of her attention either.”

“So, now your Mom takes care of the horses?”

Genevieve laughed at that. “Mom wouldn’t be caught dead mucking out stalls. Since dad passed away, Amish neighbors and their kids have looked out for them. But lately,”—she nodded her head toward a nearby farm—“the neighbor girl, Luna, has been coming several days a week to take them out and exercise them.” She got a sad expression on her face as she looked down at Charisma. “I miss it. I miss her.” She took a deep breath in and sighed, then turned to him with a playful grin. “Wanna see what she can do?”

Sebastian eyed her curiously.

Genevieve got Charisma trotting and then suddenly took off in a full gallop, letting out a loud whoop. “Race ya to the woods!”

He laughed and got Buddy going, then let him loose, following the rest of the open path until they neared the place where it narrowed and disappeared into a wooded trail.

Genevieve slowed Charisma to a walk again, and he slowed Buddy to a trot until he caught up to her.

She was laughing, her hair falling out of the bun it had been in all afternoon. “That was such a rush. I haven’t done that in so long.”

Her laugh was like magic. It made him feel things he’d never felt before. The more time they spent together, the more he was falling for this woman.

They moved on through the wooded path slowly, talking as they rode.

“I’m sorry to hear about your dad,” Sebastian said.

“Thank you. It was his heart. One day, he seemed perfectly healthy, riding around the field in the combine like he loved to do, and the next day he was gone.”

“When did he die?”

“A little over a year ago.”

“Your mom doesn’t do the farming now, does she?”

“Oh, heavens, no. She rents the land to area farmers. My mom never wanted to be a farmer’s wife to begin with, and she made that fact well known my whole life. Rhonda’s more like her in that way. She wasn’t into farm life. But I was Daddy’s little girl, always out here working and helping wherever I could.” She grew quiet as they rode. “Daddy and I went riding together a few days before he passed. It was our thing.”

The sorrow in her eyes made Sebastian’s heart ache. He wished they were standing on solid ground so he could take her in his arms and comfort her.

“I miss him.” She touched Charisma’s black mane. “We both do, don’t we, girl?”

“You really love horses, don’t you?” He already knew the answer, but wanted to hear her talk about them some more.

“So much. I love the connection people can make with them, how trusting they can be. And so loving. If I was upset, I’d go see Charisma, and she always seemed to pick up on how I was feeling. It’s a bond that’s hard to explain to someone who hasn’t been around horses much.”

Sebastian thought about that for a few moments. “I don’t think I ever really experienced that, but I did love riding. Did you ever think about working with them as a career?”

“Actually ... don’t tell the boss, but Schultz Chocolate was not my first choice of job.”

His eyebrows lifted when he looked over at her. “No? Where would you rather be working?”

“There’s this great company out in Montana that rescues horses. I went when I was in high school and helped for a month one summer. I’ve always wanted to go back there and work. There’s so much to do. So many horses are mistreated. I applied for a position there, but never heard back.”

He could tell by the expression on her face that she was disappointed, and that saddened him, but he was secretly glad she hadn’t gotten that job.

“Maybe one day you’ll get to go back there.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe. My family would hate me living so far away.”

He fixed his eyes on hers. “They’re not the only ones.”

Her cheeks turned a soft shade of pink, and her head dipped shyly.

They rode on in silence for a few minutes.

“What are your parents like?” she asked out of the blue. “Are you close with them?”

A nervousness settled in the pit of his stomach. If her questions turned too personal, he didn’t want to lie to her. He remembered the pastor’s sermon about honesty in church on Sunday. He wanted to be honest with her. He really did.

“My parents are the best. Loving and supportive to us kids. Generous and kind. We’re very close.”

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“They sound wonderful. Maybe I’ll get to meet them sometime.”

He looked over at her and made eye contact. “You will.”

“So, tell me about your siblings,” she said.

“Huh?” Had he said he had siblings? He couldn’t remember for sure.

“You said your parents were supportive to you kids, and you told me before you have a younger brother and sister.”

“Right.” He looked away.

“What are their names?” she asked.

Oh, man, did he feel sick to his stomach at the moment. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t lie to her. If ever there was a time to tell her the truth, now was it. But then her words about not wanting a wealthy man came back to him, and he panicked.

“Paul and Anna,” he answered. It was a partial truth. He had used their middle names just as he had with his own name.

She smiled at his answer, and they rode on in silence, rounding a curve that led them back to the original path toward the house. He was thankful for the break in talking, and not feeling very good about himself at the moment. He couldn’t let this go on any longer. And if she hated him for it, and if she didn’t want someone with a lot of money, then he’d have to live with that. He only hoped in time, she would find a way

to forgive him, and maybe then they would have a real chance at something together. They really couldn't until she knew the whole truth.

"There's something I need to tell you." He looked over at her, and she gave him the most hopeful look, like whatever it was he was going to say would be something very good.

"What is it?"

He pressed his lips together and was about to say the words, when Charisma suddenly lurched forward then stopped moving.

"What is it, girl?" Genevieve grabbed hold of the saddle and leaned to the side, looking down at her horse's legs. She jumped down to get a better look.

Sebastian got down from Buddy as well, and bent down next to Genevieve as she examined Charisma's leg.

"I'm so sorry, girl." Genevieve looked heartbroken as she lovingly touched Charisma's leg. "Her knee is swollen. She hasn't done that in a while, and I ran her too hard without warming her up properly. What was I thinking?"

"Hey." Sebastian lay his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure Charisma will be okay in no time."

"I hope so." She took hold of the reins and began to slowly lead her horse along the path back to the house with the utmost concern on her face. "I knew better than to run her like that. And in this heat. She's probably dehydrated too." She softly rubbed Charisma's head as she whispered, "I'm sorry."

He hated that she was beating herself up over this.

When they reached the barn, Sebastian stayed and watered the horses and took care of the saddles, while Genevieve went for some ice to wrap Charisma's leg. Once she returned, he watched her carefully wrap her beloved horse's leg, gently caressing her and whispering to her things that he couldn't make out. It was the sweetest thing to behold. She was such a warm and loving woman. He could only imagine how she'd be with children someday.

This time when that thought came into his head, he wasn't as surprised by it.

"Thanks for taking care of the tack," she said as they walked toward the house.

"No problem." He reached out and squeezed her hand, and her eyes met his. "She'll be fine, Gen. Don't worry."

A slow smile spread on her face as they walked hand in hand. "I like you calling me that."

He smiled back at her. "Good to know."

They entered the house then, and Sebastian got a drink of water in the kitchen while Genevieve went to the bathroom.

Ida entered the kitchen then and got herself a glass of water too. She leaned her back against the kitchen counter and faced him.

"It was very nice meeting you," Sebastian told her. He didn't quite understand the look on her face. It was the same one she'd given him in the living room earlier.

"I know who you are," Ida declared.

The swig of water he'd just taken went down hard. "Excuse me," he coughed out.

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Ida glanced toward the bathroom as she stepped closer and looked him straight in the eye. “You’re Sebastian Schultz.”

His heartbeat raced. How did she know?

“I knew you looked familiar, but I could not place it. And then I remembered an article I read a while back about the children of the Schultz Chocolate founder taking on bigger roles in the company.”

“Ida—”

“My memory is very long, especially when it comes to what I’ve read. This I know I’m right about.”

“I have a good reason. Please let me explain.”

“I don’t know why you’re keeping this from Genny, but—”

“I can’t really go into everything at the moment.” His gaze shot frantically toward the bathroom. “I’ve had bad experiences with relationships in the past,” he explained as quietly as he could so Genevieve wouldn’t hear him. “It’s hard to know who I can trust. But I think I can trust her, and I know it doesn’t seem like it, but she can trust me, too, Ida. I promise you, I’m going to tell her. Please, just give me a chance.”

Ida was quiet for a long, uncomfortable minute, and appeared to be contemplating the situation. “I won’t tell her.”

He was shocked by this. “You won’t?”

“I haven’t seen her this happy in a long time, and I know it has to do with you.”

“I never meant to hide this from her. It just happened.”

“I’m sure you have your reasons, but let me say this ...” Ida took another step closer, looking him straight in the eyes. “You need to tell her, and soon. The longer you wait, the worse it will be.”

“I know,” he replied.

Ida shook her head. “She’s going to be very hurt.”

He hung his head. “I know that too. And please believe me when I say that hurting her is the last thing I ever want to do.”

Ida nodded once, her lips pressed together in a tight line.

“I will tell her before the regatta.”

She patted him on the arm. “Good. Then we understand each other.”

“We do.”

“We do what?” Genevieve asked as she walked into the kitchen and opened a drawer, removing a notepad and pen from within.

Sebastian’s heart was in his throat. “We need to get back to GR.”

“Yeah, just let me leave a note for Luna about Charisma.” She looked over at Ida.

“Mom, I know you don’t like the horses, but I need you to check on her in a while and keep the knee wrapped. If it’s not better in the morning, call me, and I’ll call the vet. If she has to see him, I want to be here.”

“All right,” Ida replied. “And I like the horses just fine. So long as I don’t have to clean up after them.”

Genevieve looked straight at Sebastian, confirming with her eyes what she’d said about her mother earlier. She laid the notepad and pen on top of the counter. “Make sure Luna only comes if Charisma’s knee is better. And if so, make sure she sees this. I don’t want Luna taking her out and making it worse.”

“Got it.”

Genevieve walked over and hugged her mother. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Again, it was nice meeting you,” Sebastian told Ida.

Ida nodded. “Same to you.”

He looked back over his shoulder and gave Ida a final nod of understanding before following Genevieve out the door.

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The evening gave way to slightly cooler air as the sun hung lower in the sky.

“Do you want me to put the convertible top down?” Sebastian asked.

Genevieve’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Sure.” He pulled the latch and pressed the button, and Genevieve actually giggled as the top went down behind them.

“I’ve never ridden in a convertible with the top down before?”

“You haven’t?”

“What, like it’s something everyone does?”

He laughed. “I guess not.” He’d been riding in them since he was a teenager. He’d even owned a few. So they were sort of commonplace for him. But seeing the huge smile on her face made it seem exciting and new, like the first time all over again.

She fixed her hair into a bun again as he took off. As they headed down the road, she threw her head back and raised her arms up above her head. “This is so amazing!” she cried.

He couldn’t help laughing at her enthusiasm.

“I’ve always thought it would be fun to ride in one. This is just ...” She turned around, waving at a car traveling behind them.

He chuckled.

“Did you ever go on a hayride when you were a kid?” she asked.

“A hayride?” This wasn’t the first time she had jumped from one topic to another in a split second, and it fascinated him how her mind worked.

“Yeah, you know ... hay bales stacked in the back of a wagon pulled by a tractor across a field or down a trail?” She was still looking all around them, taking in the sights as if she hadn’t seen them thousands of times before.

“I probably did, but I don’t remember it.”

She looked over at him then. “That’s sad. This reminds me of the way I felt on hayrides.”

He stepped harder on the accelerator. “Except this goes much faster than a tractor.”

She squealed with delight. “I don’t mean the speed. I mean just us, the road ahead, and the sky above. Nothing boxing us in.” She took a deep breath. “Smell that fresh air.”

He took in a breath and smelled nothing but manure from a nearby farm. “It’s fresh all right.”

She started giggling then and did not stop. Her laughter was contagious.

“You have such a great laugh,” he finally said when his own laughter faded.

A few final laughs trickled out of her. “So do you.”

They made eye contact, and his stomach somersaulted from the affectionate look on her face.

“Tell me more about the horse rescue. What kinds of things did you do when you were there?” he asked.

“I helped feed the horses, did any cleaning duties around the barns, whatever they needed. I especially liked spending time with the horses, though. There was one that we called Roman. He was brought there in such horrible condition—skin and bones. It was hard to believe he would survive.” A sadness crossed over her face, and he could see that there were tears forming in her eyes.

He reached across and clasped her hand in his.

She smiled over at him. “But he did survive. I had to leave before he was fully recovered, but one of the employees sent me a picture. By fall, Roman was strong and thriving. It was amazing.”

“What was the job you applied for?”

“Same as what I’m doing now. Fundraising coordinator.”

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“Well, I’m sorry you didn’t get the job you really wanted.” That wasn’t the whole truth. He was thankful she’d walked into the gift shop that morning and called him a cold fish. If she’d gone to Montana to work for the horse rescue, they probably never would have met. He couldn’t even imagine that.

“I’m happy to be at Schultz. It’s a far cry better than my last job.”

“What was your last job?”

“I worked for another non-profit, raising money for breast cancer research—or so they said. I don’t doubt that some of the money actually went to a good cause, but they were not transparent with their budget and there was a lot of misuse of funds going on there. I could not in good conscience work for them anymore once I knew that.”

“That’s awful,” he said.

“Yeah, they were dishonest. And I have no respect for people who don’t tell the truth.”

His heart nearly stopped beating, and a strong sense of guilt washed over him.

“I looked up the horse rescue on a whim one day when I was sick and tired of my job, and I saw they were taking applications. I sent my résumé off to them and handed in my letter of resignation the same day. Then when my friend told me she heard The Schultz Foundation was in need of a new event coordinator, I decided not to put all my eggs in one basket, so I applied there too, but I didn’t think I had a chance of

getting it.”

“Why didn’t you have a chance?”

“For one, I figured my previous employer wouldn’t give me a good reference because we did not part on good terms.”

“I see.”

“But I got called for an interview, then they called me back for a second interview, and they offered me the position.”

“Good.”

“I almost didn’t take it. I was still kind of holding out hope for Montana.”

He realized his hand was still on hers, and she hadn’t moved hers either, so he gave it a squeeze. “I’m glad you took it.”

“So am I.”

The sun had dipped even lower in the sky by the time they reached the Schultz parking lot. Sebastian parked, opened the door for her, and walked her to her car. He was surprised when she slid her hand into his palm, but he wasn’t complaining, and he wasn’t going to miss out on this opportunity to hold her hand again. The feel of her smooth, warm skin against his palm had his body buzzing. He only wished he’d parked farther away from her car.

They each let go when she reached into her bag for the keys. She pressed the button on the key fob to unlock the doors and turned to him before climbing in.

“I had fun tonight,” she told him.

“So did I—”

She leaned closer and lifted up on her tiptoes to place a soft kiss on his cheek.

“Hey, what are you doing for the Fourth?” His words came out deeper and more raspy than his normal voice, and by the little curve of the corner of her mouth, he was sure she knew that little impromptu kiss had affected him.

“No plans. I thought about calling Rhonda and going downtown to watch the fireworks along the river.” She gazed up at him. “Do you have a better offer?”

His heart rate was chugging along at an increased rate ever since her soft lips had met his cheek, and the sweet way she was looking up at him at the moment made him want to take her in his arms and make his fantasy of pressing his lips to hers a reality. But he kept himself in check and instead asked, “Will you watch fireworks with me?”

She had the most beautiful smile on her face. “I’d love to.”

TWENTY

The Fourth of July fell in the middle of the following week, and Genevieve could barely concentrate on her work, thinking about spending the evening with Kurtis. She had thought for sure he was going to kiss her on Friday night after the time at her parents’ farm, and she was disappointed that he hadn’t. But now she was looking forward with anticipation to their time together, whatever it might hold.

It had been a long time since she’d been this excited about going on a date. She’d spent extra time in front of the mirror curling her long blonde locks, only to smooth them out again with her straightening iron. She’d never been one to worry about her

looks, but something about tonight felt important. Special. She wanted it to go well, and she was hoping it would be the beginning of something amazing.

Kurtis was amazing. It was so easy to talk to him, to open up. She loved that about their ... friendship. After tonight, she hoped she could consider what they had as more than that. But she wouldn't be pushy about it. She wanted it to happen naturally. And so far everything seemed to be progressing in that way.

She only hoped he'd really open up to her, so she could stop feeling like there was something he was hiding from her. She hated that feeling and wasn't sure where it was coming from, but it was there. Just under the surface. This niggling doubt. She wanted it gone.

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The clock ticked on her kitchen wall, and she continuously peeked out the window to see if he had arrived yet. He was running a little late—minutes only, really—but she just wanted him to get there already.

Genevieve was surprised to see Kurtis pull up in Skylar's convertible. She hadn't expected him to borrow it tonight, but knowing he'd done it for her filled her heart with joy.

She quickly closed the curtain before he spotted her spying and waited for him to come to her door. When he knocked, she waited a good ten seconds before opening it.

"Hi." She tried to say it as sweetly as possible, hoping to convey how happy she was to see him.

"Hi." His smile told her he felt the same way. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

"You should grab a jacket or sweater. The air by the lake is cooler than it is here."

"We're going to the lake?" she asked, suddenly more excited than before.

"Yes. Is that okay?"

"Absolutely." She grabbed her sweater from the hook by the door and followed him down the sidewalk to Skylar's car. "I didn't know you were in the habit of borrowing the boss's car so often."

“I owe her a favor now, apparently.”

She laughed at that.

He drove them toward the lake. The top of the car was up this time. The air the past couple days had been significantly cooler than the sticky days of last week.

Genevieve stole glances at Kurtis every so often. He wore a faded red T-shirt, which fit just right across his wide chest and showed off the muscular arms she'd only imagined, khaki shorts, and white slip-on Vans. His deep brown hair was loose and wavy rather than combed back neatly like he wore it for work, and his cheeks had a hint of five o'clock shadow.

“Like what you see?” He interrupted her perusal.

Her cheeks warmed, and she quickly returned her attention to the view outside.

They headed on toward Holland, and he parked at the State Park just as they had the last time they were there. People had already begun gathering on the beach, waiting for the sun to go down and the fireworks to begin.

Kurtis opened the trunk and removed a couple blankets and a small cooler, locked the vehicle, and started walking down toward the water.

“Do you want me to carry something?” Genevieve asked.

He tossed one of the blankets over her head. “You can carry this.”

She giggled as she pulled the blanket down and wrapped it around herself, while he wrapped the other around his own shoulders.

The wind off the water definitely gave a little chill to the air. But when he wound his fingers through hers, she didn't feel the least bit cold.

Kurtis continued walking past the edge of the park beach.

“Where are we going?”

He nodded ahead. “Just a little ways down. More private.”

She squeezed his hand. “I like private.” Her voice came out deeper and a little more sultry than she meant it to.

Kurtis stumbled a bit, and she couldn't help but laugh.

Genevieve admired each beach house they passed along their walk. When they were quite a ways off from the public beach, Kurtis finally stopped and lay his blanket out on the sand. He sat down and patted the spot next to him as he opened the cooler and handed her a bottled water.

She sat down beside him and took the bottle as she gazed up at the bluff above to a beautiful cottage overlooking the lake. “Whose place is that?”

“It's the Schultz family cottage.”

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Her eyes widened. “Are you serious? That is beautiful. Will they mind that we’re here?”

“They don’t own the beach.”

“Oh. Right.”

The sun was nearly below the horizon now. They sat in silence watching it dip lower and lower until it disappeared completely, giving way to gorgeous reds and oranges streaking across the evening sky.

“Lake Michigan sunsets are the most beautiful sunsets I’ve ever seen,” Genevieve said.

“Me too.”

She glanced behind them again. “Do you think we could get closer to the house? Or is that not allowed?”

“Do you want a tour?” he asked.

“A tour? Can we even get in there?” she asked.

“Sky gave me the security code,” he replied as he stood.

She was surprised by this. When she followed him to standing, her hands rested on her hips. “Be straight with me. What kind of relationship do you and Skylar really

have? I know you said nothing's going on there, but I mean, you're friends with her friends, you all go out to dinner and hang out, she lets you borrow her car, and you can get into their beach house. I mean, it seems like a bit much for just friends."

He stepped closer to her and took her face in his hands, which made her heart skip a beat. "I promise you, she is my friend and nothing more. We just go way ... way back."

"Friends."

"Please believe me." His forehead scrunched together as he pleaded with her.

She wanted to. So badly. "Okay. I believe you."

This didn't seem like what he'd been holding back from her, though.

They climbed the many steps that led up the hill to a beautiful deck overlooking the lake. There were couches and chairs situated in a seating area to one side and a large dining table covered by an umbrella to the other. He took her hand and led her past all that to an entrance. Pressing several buttons, as if he'd done it hundreds of times before, the lock released, and he opened the door and led her into an expansive living room. The windows wrapping around the room gave way to the very last of the sun setting outside, and Kurtis went around flipping on lights while she admired the space.

"Come on. I'll show you around."

As she passed by a cabinet, she noticed a framed photograph of a group of people. Kurtis and Skylar were in the group as well as Sebastian. She wondered who all the others were.

“So, you weren’t kidding that you all go way back.”

He took the photo from her and set it back down. “Yeah. That was at a company party here a few years back.”

“I think I’m going to like working for this company. A lot.”

“You will,” he said as he took her hand and led her into the kitchen, then on through to some bedrooms and their gigantic bathrooms with jacuzzi tubs, downstairs to a game room, and then out onto a private patio below the deck that held a hot tub.

“Hot tub,” she stated the obvious. “Nice.”

“We can go in if you want.”

“I didn’t bring a suit.”

“There are suits to borrow here.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure if she was ready for him to see her in a bathing suit. “Maybe another time.”

He smiled. “We should probably get back down to the lake. The fireworks will be starting soon anyway.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

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They went through the house again, and he shut off all the lights and locked up. Lightning bugs had started to flit around in the air, and Genevieve stopped by the railing of the deck to watch them. She felt Kurtis's body heat as he stopped beside her and looked out over the side of the hill at the little blinks of light all around them.

"This reminds me of my childhood." She laughed to herself. "Except for the million dollar beach house and this amazing view. But the lightning bugs are the same." She glanced over at Kurtis, who was smiling at her. He was close enough that all he'd have to do was lean six inches forward and their lips would touch.

A loud boom suddenly sounded from down the beach, and her face lit up. "Fireworks!" She took off down the stairs with Kurtis on her tail and jumped onto the blanket, facing down the beach where they'd walked from to watch the fireworks at a distance.

She wrapped the extra blanket over her shoulders and clapped her hands together. "I love fireworks."

"Just wait," he told her.

She eyed him curiously. "For what?"

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than a loud boom sounded, and she spotted a few trails of light climbing straight out in front of them from a barge out on the water. Her eyes followed as they reached their final height in the sky and burst into cascades of red, white, and blue.

Her hands came up to cover her mouth, and her eyes shot to his then back to the display. She'd never been this close to the fireworks before, and it was amazing. "Did you do this?"

"Skylar told me someone up the beach was getting married tonight and launching fireworks of their own." Kurtis sat down and scooted close to her, taking the edge of the blanket from around her shoulder and tugging it until it wrapped around his broad shoulders too.

Genevieve scooted closer into his side to watch the show. He smelled spicy and sweet at the same time, and she tried to inhale deeply without him knowing, wanting to memorize his scent.

"You're warm." His voice was low and soft.

"So are you," she replied, despite the goosebumps that traveled over her body at his words.

They watched as the sky lit up with a waterfall of twinkling white lights around a giant red star. She glanced over at him, only to discover that he wasn't watching the patriotic display with her after all. His eyes were completely focused on her.

She shifted her body, turning to face him more, and his fingertips made contact with her cheek. The feather light touch as he brushed along her jaw and slid his fingers into the hair at the base of her neck made her shiver.

"Are you cold?" he whispered.

"No." She breathed the answer, and they were so close now that her breath bounced off his face and onto her own.

“Gen.” She loved this new nickname he had for her.

“Yes?”

“I want to kiss you.” His words were breathy, and she trembled as his nose brushed hers. “May I?”

She felt like giggling at how proper he sounded in that moment and at how giddy she felt. Her hands slowly slid up and gripped the fabric at the front of his T-shirt.

“You’re killing me here,” he breathed.

Her answer was to tug him closer and press her lips against his.

He gently held the back of her head, his thumb brushing over her jaw, while his other arm slid around her waist, bringing her even closer to him. His kisses were dizzying, his lips soft yet firm against hers, and it wasn’t long before she couldn’t think straight.

The loud and constant booms of the fireworks grand finale above brought them both out of their heady fog.

“Wow!” they both breathed at the same time, unable to look anywhere but at each other as the show ended.

He continued to hold her face in his hands as he placed soft kisses on each of her cheeks then one more on her lips.

“I like you, Genevieve,” he whispered in her ear. “So much.”

A delightful warmth spread through her body at the feel of his breath on her neck. “I

couldn't tell."

With another soft kiss to her lips, he silenced her teasing laugh.

Genevieve sighed when the kiss ended. "I like you too, Kurtis."

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He shifted away then, facing the dark lake before them, and she could sense a change in the air between them.

“What is it?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. It’s getting late, and I still have to drive you home.”

“I don’t want this night to end.”

“Neither do I.” He turned to her again. “But we do have to work in the morning.”

“We could play hooky.” She giggled.

“I wouldn’t object to that.”

“Maybe a visit to Captain Sundae.”

“Maybe.” He slipped an arm around her back and pulled her into his side.

Genevieve gazed up at the night sky. “I love when the sky is clear. You can see so many stars when you’re away from the city like this.” She lay back on the blanket and tugged on his arm until he joined her. “I wonder if we’ll see any shooting stars.”

“What would you wish for?” he asked as he slipped his fingers through hers.

“If wishes were fishes, we’d all swim in riches,” she replied with a laugh. “That’s what my daddy used to say, anyway.”

His grip on her hand loosened a little, and once again, Kurtis seemed to withdraw at something she'd said. She wished she knew him better and understood his tells, but they weren't there yet.

Yet was such a hopeful word. This had truly been the best date she'd ever been on, and thinking there was more to come, more to look forward to, things they hadn't gotten to yet, filled her with an abundance of joy. So much that she felt like jumping up and dancing, or maybe just kissing him again.

She let go of his hand and rolled onto her side, propping her head up with her hand, and looked down at him. He remained on his back, lit only by the moonlight, and he was perhaps the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered, as if he had stolen her thoughts. He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek, causing goosebumps to travel over every inch of her skin in anticipation of what might come next.

She leaned into his hand and closed her eyes, prepared for another breathtaking kiss.

"What the?" He suddenly dropped his hand and sat up.

Her eyes flew open, and she turned to see where his attention had gone.

"Nobody was supposed to be here tonight." His eyes were fixed on the beach house above, now glowing with what appeared to be every light in the place.

"Should we go up there?"

"I think I should."

She followed him up the stairs to the landing of the deck.

“Can you wait out here for a minute, and I’ll see what’s going on?” he asked.

“Sure. We’re not going to get into trouble for being here are we?”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “We won’t. I just want to check on the house and make sure everything’s okay.”

“Sure thing.”

She watched as he disappeared into the house. She thought she heard voices from where she stood. She moved along under the cover of shadow, venturing closer to the door, hoping to hear what was happening.

There was movement within, and she suddenly spotted a familiar face.

Sebastian.

TWENTY-ONE

We thought you were in California with Adelia,” Sebastian told his brother. “Why didn’t you tell us you were back?”

“I didn’t think anyone would actually care,” Gus replied.

“You know that’s not true at all. Sky has been worried sick about you. She was relieved when she found out you were with Adelia.”

“Yeah, well, I felt like I was wearing out my welcome at her place. Besides, her parents are constantly in her business, and they started to get up in my business as well.”

Sebastian stepped to his brother and lay a hand on his shoulder, but Gus winced and jerked away.

“Gus, come on. I’m on your side and you know it.”

Gus had a sadness in his eyes.

“I believe you can be a great leader, brother. I really do. But you’ve got to decide once and for all to change.”

Gus’s attention suddenly shifted to the back door. “Who’s with you?” He got a devious grin on his face. “Is that Genevieve? You brought her here for the fireworks? Did you tell her who you are?”

“Not yet,” Sebastian admitted, “and I’d appreciate if you didn’t tell her.”

“What’s taking you so long?” Gus asked.

“I’m trying to find the right time.”

“The right time is probably before you take her to bed.”

“I’m not taking anyone to bed.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Gus walked to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer, opening it quickly, and taking a long chug. “You’re the good brother. How could I forget?”

“Gus.”

The back door suddenly opened, and Genevieve entered. Sebastian’s heart leapt into his throat, hoping she hadn’t heard him address his brother by his real name.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. I really have to use the bathroom.”

“Come on in,” Sebastian told her. “It’s down the hall, where I showed you earlier.”

“Hey, Genevieve,” Gus greeted her. “How’s it goin’?”

“Very well, Sebastian. How are you? We haven’t seen you around lately.”

“Busy with other commitments.”

She nodded and held up a finger. “Be right back.”

“She is so hot,” Gus said once she was out of earshot. “You are one lucky son of a

gun.”

“Please don’t talk about her like that.” Sebastian hated when Gus got like this, and he worried what might pop out of his brother’s mouth next, since it was obvious he was not sober at the moment.

“Well, you’re lucky until she finds out who you are. Then you’ll just be a sorry son of a ...” Gus’s voice trailed off before he finished that thought. He moved into the living room and plopped down on one of the comfy sofas, taking another swig of his beer.

Sebastian took that moment to nonchalantly text Skylar and let her know where Gus was.

Genevieve came out of the bathroom a minute later looking relieved.

“Ready to go?” Sebastian asked her.

“Sure.”

“No! You just got here!” Gus patted the seat next to him. “Don’t go yet. Celebrate with me. It’s Independence Day. Let’s toast to our independence.” He held his beer bottle in the air.

Sebastian wanted to get Genevieve out of there as quickly as he could. “Uh, you seem like you’ve done a little celebrating already ... Sebastian. I’m going to get Genevieve home now.”

“Oh, right ... Sebastian. That’s me. Sebastian. I’m the president of Schultz Chocolate. The head honcho. The big boss.” Gus looked over at Genevieve. “Why would you go for a guy like Kurtis here, who makes little more than minimum wage, instead of someone like ... well, me.”

She walked over and sat down beside him. “Are you all right, Sebastian?”

“I’m great. How’s your sister?”

“She’s fine.” Genevieve looked over at Sebastian and gave him a concerned look before turning back to Gus. “Can I get you something? Water? Coffee?”

“I don’t need a nurse or a waitress.” Gus’s gaze moved from her face to her chest and back as he slid closer and leaned toward her, eyeing her mouth. “But you do have what I need.”

“Hey! Knock it off!” Sebastian cried out.

Genevieve backed away and quickly scrambled to stand. “I’d like to go now.”

Sebastian took her hand in his. “Okay.”

She walked quickly toward the door, her hand slipping from his as she exited the house before him.

Just before he stepped out, he turned back to his brother, lowering his voice. “Get it together, Gus.”

Genevieve was halfway down the steps before he even reached the top. When he joined her at the bottom, he drew her into a hug. “I’m so sorry about that. He gets like that sometimes.”

“I had no idea. He seemed so put together the day I met him.”

“Are you okay? He should not have treated you like that.”

“I’m fine. Just surprised is all. I guess you never know what’s really going on in someone’s life. They can seem like they have it all when everything is falling apart. I’m going to pray for him.”

“He could use it.” That was the first time he’d heard her speak of faith in any way. As they walked along the beach holding hands, he felt the need to ask, “So, you believe in God.”

“I do,” she declared. “I was practically raised in the small Bible church in my hometown. Do you go to church?”

“Occasionally with my family.”

He loved that she was a woman of faith. It's what he'd always hoped to find in the woman he fell in love with. His brain stuttered at that thought. Was he falling in love with her? There was so much about her to like. Not only her physical appearance, but the woman she was. Her thoughts and feelings. Her enthusiasm over her work and her love for horses. And now to learn that she loved God and trusted Him to hear her prayers. She was the whole package. And he had no doubt that his deep like for her was morphing into much more.

"I'm starting to freak out a little over the regatta," Genevieve admitted as they stood in front of her apartment door.

"Why?" he asked.

"It's just, there's still so much to do. What if I've taken on more than I can handle?"

His hand moved to her cheek, and it felt natural, as if it was something he did all the time. "Hey, that's why you have me. I'll help with anything you need. You can do this."

"You've never seen me in action before. How do you know I'm not just full of it? How do you know I can really pull this off?" she asked, teasingly.

"I believe in you."

"You do?" The teasing look in her eyes was gone, now replaced with a rapt expression.

He gave her a nod, and the corners of his mouth turned upward.

She lay her hand on his chest. "Thank you. You don't know what it means to have someone who supports me like this. I've never really had ..."

A few beats of silence

passed. “I’ve never had a serious relationship before.”

Sebastian's eyes widened. "Never?"

"I mean, I was a bit of a tomboy growing up, so boys didn't see me that way, I guess. I've had boyfriends now and then, but most were just casual, and we were more friends than anything else. None I ever wanted something serious with." Her eyes widened this time, and she began stumbling over her words. "Not that ... I wasn't saying you and I ..."

He started to chuckle as she lowered her head and looked down at the ground.

"This is coming out all wrong," she muttered.

He touched her chin with the tip of his index finger and lifted her face until their eyes met. "It sounds just fine to me."

"Tonight was wonderful." The combination of light from the moon and the nearby streetlight sparkled in her eyes.

"It was. And I'd like more wonderful moments with you." His pulse stuttered as he settled his hands on her waist then slid them around her, his fingertips pressing into her back as he drew her close.

She smiled up at him. "Me too."

"Starting right now." He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, soft and gentle. Having her in his arms felt incredible, and the soft sigh she made when he deepened the kiss sent a thrill through him. He was kissing Genevieve. And she liked him as

much as he liked her.

But there was still this little nagging in the back of his mind. She liked him. He was certain of that now. He knew he could trust her. And the regatta was getting closer and closer. It was time to tell her the truth. He had to come clean and just pray that she would forgive him.

When their lips parted, she lay her head on his chest, and he held her close. He never wanted to let her go. He rested his chin on the top of her head, terrified of how she would react when he told her what he'd been dreading telling her for weeks.

"There's something I have to tell you," he forced himself to say.

She lifted her head and gazed up at him. So hopeful, with that same captivated look as earlier.

"Uh ..."

The blood began coursing through his veins, his palms were suddenly sweaty, and his stomach was tied in knots. What if she never forgave him? Now that he'd held her in his arms and tasted her sweet kisses, how could he ever go back to a life without her? Panic shot through his body, and he froze. As much as he tried to will himself to speak, the right words would not come.

"What is it?" she asked, her forehead creased with concern.

"We should fill out the paperwork to disclose our dating relationship to Human Resources," he blurted.

She got a little twinkle in her eyes. "So this means we're dating then?"

Feeling like a failure and a fraud, he leaned in slowly, placed a soft kiss on her cheek, and whispered, “If that’s what you want.”

She smiled and nodded. “Is it what you want?”

“More than anything.”

She threw her arms around his neck and gazed into his eyes. “I wasn’t expecting to find you, Kurtis Fraser, but now that I have, I’m not letting you go.”

He wrapped his arms tightly around her back and hugged her close. He felt exactly the same way, but hearing a name that wasn’t his come from her lips broke his heart. The guilt and regret were so great now, he was drowning in them.

But if he told her the truth, would she ever look at him the way she had tonight? Would she ever be able to call him Sebastian without remembering his lies? She’d made it clear that honesty was important to her, that she had no respect for liars.

A sudden realization hit him over the head. He’d just suggested signing a form at work to disclose their relationship. She would expect him to sign it as Kurtis Fraser, even though there was no employee by that name at Schultz Chocolate. At this point, he knew he was totally screwed.

TWENTY-TWO

Do you really have to go?” Genevieve hated the thought of being without Kurtis for ten days.

“I do. This trip has been planned for a while now.” He came up behind where she was standing by her office window and slid his arms around her waist. “But I don’t know if I can stand being away from you for ten days.”

The whisper of his breath against her neck caused her to shiver, but not because she was cold. She turned in his arms and rested her forearms on his shoulders as her fingertips slid into the hair at the base of his neck. “Me neither.”

He leaned into her, pressing her back against the glass, as his mouth descended on hers.

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She melted into him, and he kissed her until she was dizzy and weak in the knees. Her arms around his neck helped keep her on her feet, but their bodies pressed together like they were intensified the sensations coursing through her. Never in her life had she been kissed this way—sweet and gentle, yet blazing with the passion and desire she knew he was holding back. She knew, because she was doing the same thing.

His forehead met hers. “I’ll miss that.”

“Ya think?” She smirked.

“But mostly you.” He reached up with one hand and slid his fingers through the length of her hair.

She moved her forefinger along the skin of his neck and traced along his jaw and over his chin to his full bottom lip. “I’ll miss you too.”

The past week had flown by, and every day it was almost as if she was floating on a cloud. She loved being close to Kurtis, working together on the regatta, spending time together outside of work. They made a perfect team, and she was very close to having all the items checked off of her list.

There was still one thing bugging her, though. Whenever she asked about his family or tried to learn more about his life outside of work, he still gave her vague answers or steered the conversation to other topics. They knew a lot about each other, but she didn’t even know where he lived. And it disappointed her that she was already more invested in this relationship than he was. They’d only known each other a month,

though, and this being her first real dating relationship, she wasn't exactly sure how things were done. She didn't want to come across as too naive, but it seemed like common sense that if you truly cared for someone and thought there might be a future with them, that you would want the person to know all about you. She'd taken him to the farm and introduced him to her mom before they were even an official couple.

Still, she wasn't sure if she should broach the subject yet. She wanted him to want to share things with her. So, for the time being, she let it go. That, and the fact that he hadn't said anything more about disclosing their relationship to Human Resources.

Today, though, she didn't want to think about anything other than spending every moment she could with Kurtis, because he was leaving tomorrow morning for a corporate conference in San Francisco before spending a few days at the Schultz Chocolate factory in nearby San Jose.

"How am I going to finish all the final items on my list?" she pouted.

He tapped the tip of her nose. "You'll get them done. And I'll be back on Friday, so whatever last minute details you need help with on Saturday, I'm your man."

She grinned. "Yes you are."

He chuckled at that and kissed her again.

On the morning of the regatta, Genevieve arrived at the yacht club early to check in on the team setting up for the gala that night. Everything looked incredible already, and the room was only half put together. The decor was black and gold—black tablecloths, gold curtains, vases of white roses and hydrangeas centered on the tables with black and white feathers sticking out and strands of pearls spilling over the edges. The stage background had been built in a giant gold art deco pattern with professional lighting above and behind to give everything a warm glow. And there

was a dance floor set up in the center of the room with the Schultz Chocolate logo projected onto the floor.

Genevieve stood there, staring in disbelief at her vision come to life.

“This looks amazing.” Kurtis’s voice hummed next to her ear, and she spun around and launched herself at him.

“You’re here!”

He squeezed her tightly before planting a soft kiss on her cheek. “See, you didn’t need me to get everything done.”

She let go and faced the room again. “It really does look great, doesn’t it?”

He put his arm around behind her waist and pulled her into his side. “I never doubted it for a second.”

She was about to thank him for being so supportive when he brought her body flush with his and interrupted all coherent thought with a scorching kiss. When his lips moved away, her eyes remained closed while she recovered. She nearly fell forward when he loosened his grip on her.

He chuckled as he steadied her, and she finally opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

“I missed you.” He was grinning like a fool.

She lay her hand on his chest. “I missed you too.”

“Are you ready for today?”

“I think so.” She glanced around the room. “Looks like they’re making great progress in here. We should go check and make sure everything’s getting set up outside.”

“Okay.” He let her go, and they ventured out to the yard.

The outdoor team was already assembled, and most things had been set up the night before. Food trucks had started to arrive. The dinghies were lined up for a race at noon. But there were a few last minute things going up, like the inflatable floating obstacle course in the lake and the games and activities in the kids’ tent.

Genevieve hoped there would be something for everyone to enjoy during the day.

The regatta was scheduled for two-thirty in the afternoon, followed by the gala at seven.

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She couldn't wait to see Kurtis all dressed up, and she couldn't wait to see the look on his face when she showed up in her pretty little flapper dress. It was going to be an awesome night. And she was hoping this would be the night that he told her those three little words she'd been dying to hear from him. Because she had surely been feeling them for weeks now, but she'd been too afraid to say it.

A black Cadillac Escalade pulled up to the yacht club entrance then, followed by Skylar's Porsche. Skylar and Franky got out of her car. Then Genevieve saw Ephraim Schultz step out of the Escalade.

"Let's go welcome them." Genevieve was looking forward to making his acquaintance.

Kurtis glanced across the yard at the people who had exited the cars. "Uh, you go ahead," he told her. "There's something I have to take care of."

"I thought maybe you'd introduce me since you know their family so well."

"Skylar can introduce you."

"But you just got here."

He kissed her on the cheek. "I'll see you later."

She stood there gaping as he walked across the yard in the opposite direction, leaving her alone.

What the heck!

Deeply disappointed, she took a calming breath and walked across the yard. Kurtis's behavior was sometimes so strange and confusing.

"Hey, Genevieve," Skylar greeted her, then turned to her parents. "Mom, Dad, this is Genevieve Willis, the brains behind this event. Genevieve, these are my parents, Ephraim and Harriet Schultz."

"It's so wonderful to finally meet you both." Genevieve held her hand out to Ephraim first.

He took her hand and shook it firmly. "I've heard a lot about you and this event, Miss Willis. We've been looking forward to it since Skylar mentioned it."

"Lovely to meet you, dear," Harriet said with a soft yet firm shake of Genevieve's hand.

The other couple who had arrived in the SUV stepped up to the group, and Franky introduced them as his parents, Wayne and Glenda Middlebury.

As the others chatted, Glenda turned to Genevieve. "I love that you decided on a Roaring Twenties theme for tonight's gala. I think it will be such a nice change from the usual events."

"Thank you. I think so too."

"What else will the evening entail?"

Genevieve shared about the dinner and awards as well as the silent auction and dancing.

“Is Sebastian auctioning off guitar lessons again this year?”

“No. I didn’t even know Sebastian played,” Genevieve replied.

“It was one of the biggest items of the night last year. You’ll have to go tell him to add it to the auction.” Glenda nodded toward where the team was putting the finishing touches on the decorations.

“I’m afraid Sebastian won’t be joining us this year.”

“Oh no, I hadn’t heard that. Is he just helping out this morning then?”

Genevieve was confused. “No, he’s not helping.”

“Just supervising then?” she chuckled.

“He hasn’t been here, and I don’t think he’ll be making an appearance.” She thought back to drunk Sebastian at the beach house on the Fourth of July.

Glenda’s eyebrows scrunched together. “But you were talking to him when we arrived.”

“Okay, Mom,” Franky interrupted. “Let’s go inside and check out the decorations for the gala.”

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Franky led his parents along behind the Schultzes and into the building.

“Sky,” Genevieve whispered after her.

She looked over her shoulder and stopped walking as Genevieve approached.

“Why did Franky’s mom think I was talking to Sebastian when they arrived?”

Skylar shrugged her shoulders. “She must have thought she saw him or something. She gets confused easily.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Everything looks great, Genevieve,” Skylar told her. “Everyone’s going to love it.”

“Thank you.”

Skylar entered the building after her family and the Middleburys and left Genevieve standing alone on the sidewalk. There was a flurry of last minute activity all around her, but she had an unsettling feeling. She didn’t know Glenda Middlebury or if she had a tendency to get confused easily, but the whole thing made her uneasy. Including the fact that Kurtis had scurried off so quickly.

As the day went on, families from around the area descended on the yacht club and spent the day enjoying the events with their kids, competing in the inflatable course and the dinghy race. Everything was a big success so far, and Genevieve couldn’t have been happier.

Well, that wasn't true. All day long, she kept looking for Kurtis, wondering why he wasn't there with her. She'd texted him several times with no reply. She tried to focus on the day and not worry, but she thought he'd be there at her side. He was as much a part of the planning of this day as she was. He'd been there to help her with all the little details, and now the day had arrived and she was going it alone.

Thankfully, she wasn't completely alone. She had been welcomed in by the Schultz family, who praised her great efforts for this event.

When it came time for the regatta, Genevieve planned to go watch with the rest of the spectators and see how everyone was enjoying it. She started toward the parking lot, but was unexpectedly intercepted by Ephraim Schultz.

"You'll be riding on the yacht with us, won't you?" he asked.

"To watch the race?" she asked in surprise.

"Of course. You put this day together, young lady. It's only right that you have a front row seat."

Excitement coursed through her at the thought of riding on the Schultz's yacht. "I would love that."

"It's settled then." Ephraim motioned for her to follow, and they joined the family, who were boarding the yacht along with a dozen or so others.

Genevieve took in everything around her as she boarded this luxurious watercraft. The rope that held it to the dock, the gangplank as she walked across, people on the deck above, the windows on the upper level, the antennas and instruments on the roof of the main cabin. She smiled to herself. Look at me now, Daddy.

When she found Skylar and Franky, they were joking around, as usual, and she took a seat next to them. Genevieve listened to their banter and found the two of them adorable, making her wonder why they weren't a couple. But maybe theirs was more of a brother and sister relationship. They sure seemed perfect together, though.

The yacht sailed through the channel and out onto Lake Michigan, where the sailboats were waiting to begin the race. The sky was clear blue, the sun shone brightly, and it was a perfect day on the water. Not too choppy or rough, but with just enough of a breeze. An ideal day for a sailboat race.

Franky reached across the space with his foot and tapped Genevieve's leg. "Why the long face?"

She forced a smile in reply.

He guffawed. "That was about as sincere as Skylar when she says I'm funny."

"You are funny," Skylar said with a wink.

"I'm sorry. I just wish Kurtis was here."

They looked at each other then back at her.

"He'll be here," Skylar told her.

Genevieve's eyebrows lifted. "He will?"

"He had some things to take care of today."

“What things?”

“I don’t want to spoil anything,” Skylar said, “but you’ll see him at the gala tonight.”

She breathed out with relief. That was exactly what she needed to hear. She’d been so worried after he took off and after not being able to get ahold of him all day. If he’d only told her that he wouldn’t be able to make it to the race, she would have understood. What was he taking care of? She wondered what he might be planning? Was it something for her? Suddenly, she was even more excited to see what the evening held.

All the boats traveling across the water were a beautiful sight, and seeing the sailing teams in action was amazing. When she’d decided to arrange this regatta, she’d actually never been to one herself. She’d heard about them and knew they were a big draw, which was why she’d gone with this. But the disappointment over not sharing the day with Kurtis eclipsed any happiness she felt over watching the regatta from the comfort of a seventy-foot yacht.

When they reached land again, Genevieve checked to make sure all the details were set for the evening’s event. The place looked amazing. The team of volunteers she had assembled were already arriving and ready to meet the caterer and band and direct people where they needed to be. Kurtis had insisted she leave those details to others who were capable so she could go get ready. It was smart. If she hadn’t done that, she would most definitely be rushing around, organizing, going over her list, even though everything was crossed off by now. She needed this time. She wanted to walk into that building and see the look on Kurtis’s face. It made her giddy just thinking about it.

As she was about to turn the corner and head down the hallway toward the exit, she heard Sebastian's voice. He was standing by the doors with a tall blonde woman whose back was to her, and they seemed to be in a serious conversation. Both were dressed and ready for the gala—he in an expensive looking suit and she in a gown that looked like it was straight from Calvin Klein or some other high end designer.

“Maybe this wasn't such a good idea,” Sebastian told her. “They don't want me here. I told you what my dad said. It's not good for the company for me to be seen at functions right now.”

“But if you truly want to be part of the business, you have to show them that you're changing. Don't run away.”

“I don't know. Now that we're here, I kind of wish we'd just stayed on the beach in Malibu.”

Genevieve felt a little bit like a stalker standing just around the corner, listening to them, and not making her presence known.

“But you agreed with me eight hours ago. I flew all the way here to be with you for this,” the woman said as she rotated her body, revealing her face.

Genevieve held in a gasp. Adelia Allen? She had no idea Sebastian knew her. Adelia was one of Genevieve's favorite actresses and basically Hollywood royalty—the daughter of Hugh Allen and Cora Roberts, both Oscar winners, and the highest paid couple in the movie business. Genevieve wasn't normally one to be a fangirl, but she really wanted to rush toward her and tell her just how much she loved her movies. Instead, she watched as Adelia took Sebastian's hand and started leading him down the hallway.

“This is the first step, okay. Don't second-guess yourself. Just remember what we

talked about. Show them you want this. One step at a time.”

Genevieve was about to move into the hallway and introduce herself, when Adelia spoke again.

“I believe in you, Gus. I always have, and I always will.”

“Thanks, Deals.”

Genevieve took a few steps back so she wouldn’t be seen. Maybe Adelia had misspoken. But then she heard another voice greet them.

“Well, Augustus Schultz, I didn’t think we’d be seeing you here today.”

“Hello, Mrs. Middlebury.”

As the three of them chatted, Genevieve’s back hit the brick wall behind her. Her heart and mind were racing. Augustus? This makes no sense. Why would he tell me he was Sebastian if he wasn’t?

Her mind jumped from thought to thought. Maybe they’re twins. Maybe that’s not the man I met. Then she began to piece together conversations. The gossip about Gus at work. Skylar so worried for her brother. Then his drunkenness on the Fourth of July rushed back to her. Kurtis had to know that Gus was not Sebastian. Why would he let her believe that he was?

Kurtis had lied to her!

She wasn’t sure how long she stood there before she finally pulled out the iPhone Kurtis had given her and did a search for Augustus Schultz. There were headlines galore about the playboy brother of the Schultz family and his many escapades and

brushes with the law, including the paparazzi photos the ladies at the office had been gossiping about—ones of Gus in some guy's face and another of him falling over drunk outside a bar.

She scanned through other photos until she noticed a familiar face. Her heart skipped a beat as she took in the photograph of Kurtis standing between Skylar and Augustus at a past fundraising event. Only, the caption told an entirely different story.

“Skylar, Sebastian, and Augustus Schultz at this year's Schultz Foundation fundraiser.”

She dropped her phone onto the floor, making a loud crack. Luckily, she had that protective case or it definitely would've shattered the screen.

Kurtis is Sebastian?

The pounding of her heart was loud in her ears, and her eyes burned with tears as she bent down to pick up her phone. Another hand reached for it at the same time, and she looked up into the eyes of Augustus Schultz.

“Hey, Genevieve.” As he lifted her phone to hand it to her, his eyes fell on the image on the screen before darting up to meet hers. “I can explain.”

Genevieve snatched the phone from his hand and stood, pushing past him as she made a beeline for the exit.

“Please, let me explain.”

“You’re sick,” she spit out. “All of you.”

His hand grabbed her arm as he caught up to her. “He was going to tell you.”

“When? He’s had plenty of opportunities.” She was trembling now.

“I don’t know, but his plan was always to tell you.”

“Well, isn’t that big of him?”

“He cares so much about you, Genevieve.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. The tears burned in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She yanked her arm out of his grasp and ran to her car. He caught up to her just as she drove out of the parking spot, squealing her tires as she left the place and the people she never wanted to see again.

Genevieve lay crying on her bed, face buried in her pillow, as Rhonda’s fingers softly combed through her hair and gently caressed her back, calming and comforting her. She’d been crying for an hour, and she was nearing the point where there were no more tears left to cry.

She sniffled as she turned her head to rest on her cheek and looked up at her sister.
“I’m such a fool.”

“No, you’re not.” Rhonda lay her hand on Genevieve’s cheek. “You couldn’t have known.”

“They all knew. Every single one of them. They lied to me, and I fell for it. I’m sure they’ve all been having a good laugh over this.” Sadness and grief washed over as she pictured him. “I can’t believe he lied to me.”

She was wrong. There were still plenty of tears left to cry.

Rhonda lay down and faced Genevieve. “I’m sure there’s some kind of explanation.”

“I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Nothing he can say will make me understand why he did this.” She glanced over at her alarm clock and sat up in a panic. “How am I supposed to go to this gala now? I can’t face them. I can’t get up in front of them and introduce Skylar. I can’t look any of them in the eye after this.”

Rhonda sat up and took her hand, squeezing it between her own. “You are the strongest person I know. You will get through this.”

“I don’t know how.”

“I know it’s really messed up what they did, but you have done an amazing job with this fundraiser. Just get up there and show them that they didn’t break you. Don’t let them win.”

She lay back down on her pillow as details of the past two months flooded her mind. The way he avoided spending time together at the office. The day he’d whisked her

away to the chocolate factory because his own father and Wayne Middlebury were standing outside the main entrance. His close relationship with Skylar—his sister! The rooftop garden, where they wouldn't be seen working together. Taking her into the beach house—his family's beach house. Mrs. Middlebury recognizing him at the regatta that morning.

Remembering all those moments made her livid. Why hadn't she done a little research before taking the job? She could have easily looked up the history of the Schultz family and found more information there. But she'd been so anxious to leave behind her other job that she'd taken the position, trusting the wonderful reputation and notoriety of the Schultz Chocolate company.

What a joke.

Her thoughts returned to all the sweet moments she'd shared with the man she thought was Kurtis, and her heart began to ache. How could she have been so oblivious to his lies?

Rhonda was right. She couldn't stand by and let him get away with this. She had to go there and tell him she knew who he really was. And even though facing him was a heartbreaking prospect, she knew exactly what she was going to say.

TWENTY-THREE

Genevieve was nowhere in sight. Sebastian had purposely waited until the gala was well under way before he arrived, standing toward the back in the shadows, staying out of sight for fear of someone outing him. Skylar had told him Genevieve would be seated with their family toward the front, but she wasn't at their table. He scanned the room, surprised not to see her there.

It appeared the evening was going off without a hitch. The band they'd hired was

playing some jazz tunes, guests were enjoying the music out on the dance floor, while others were placing their bids at the auction tables.

He glanced around and took in the warm glow from the lighting and the candles. The place looked amazing all lit up at night. The only light missing was hers. He knew the second she walked into the room, the whole place would shine.

His biggest regret of the day was not being able to spend it with her, not being there by her side as everything they'd worked on came to fruition. But he couldn't have shown his face and risked ruining her day. Instead, he'd spent the afternoon making special preparations for tomorrow to take her out and spoil her and celebrate the success of the event. That is, if she was still talking to him after tonight.

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While away in California, he had decided it was time to tell her the truth. He'd been praying about it, hoping she would find it in her heart to forgive him. He had no idea what was going to happen, but he couldn't let it go on anymore. It would be the most difficult conversation they'd ever have, but come what may, he had to do it. No matter how afraid he was that this would change everything, he couldn't go on lying now that he was head over heels in love with her.

Fifteen minutes had passed since he'd arrived, and the time was nearing for Genevieve to take the stage and introduce Skylar, who was giving a speech and awarding the regatta winners their trophies. Why wasn't Genevieve there yet? He pulled out his phone, thinking he might call her, and noticed it had died at some point during the day. He wondered if he'd missed any calls.

He shifted his stance and scanned the room again. Where was his beautiful girl?

Just then, he spotted her, looking like she'd stepped out of the 1920s—long hair pinned up in golden waves, a black headband with a little feather sticking out, strings of pearls around her neck, and the flapper dress she'd told him about. The fringe swayed back and forth against her calves, and the fabric clung to her curves in just the right way, which made his pulse pound a little harder as he watched her walk toward the stage.

“Gen,” he called out to her, but she didn't hear him.

He was channeling Gatsby at the moment in his brown wool suit with coordinating button up v-neck vest and two-tone oxfords. He'd even worn a fedora to complete the look. Genevieve was going to love it, and they were going to be the best looking

couple on the dance floor.

That's all he wanted. One dance with her at the end of the night. One more chance to hold her in his arms and kiss her lips before he took her aside and told her the truth. He just prayed it wouldn't be the last time he ever got to do those things.

When Genevieve stepped up onto the stage, Sebastian could tell something wasn't quite right. Her eyes were puffy, and she wasn't wearing the signature smile that usually lit up her face. Instead, she was staring at the microphone, hands trembling as she gripped it on its stand, like she needed something to hold her up.

She lifted her head, and their eyes met. Her lips parted briefly, and he thought he might get to see those cute dimples of hers after all, but she didn't smile. Not at all. Instead, she pressed her lips together, like she was fighting herself from crying.

His heart ached. He wished he knew what was the matter. He wanted to make it all better for her. But what came out of her mouth was not what he was expecting.

"Good evening, everyone. Welcome to tonight's gala. I'm Genevieve Willis, event coordinator for the Schultz Foundation." Her voice was shaky, and she took a deep calming breath before continuing. "My dad always told me that honesty is the best policy. It's cliché, I know. People say it all the time, but he used that phrase more than once while I was growing up, and it's always stuck with me. My whole life, those five words have made me strive to be an honest person. Not just for myself, but to make my dad proud of me.

"Before coming to work for the Schultz Foundation, I had never worked for a company filled with such honest and generous people. I never knew it was possible to find a company that had so much integrity and felt so much like a family. Putting together this regatta has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I've learned a lot about myself and the heart of this company. Because of the Schultz

Chocolate family, I'm seeing everything in a whole new light. And that's the honest truth."

People around the room began to clap then, but she kept talking.

"And now I'd like to introduce you to the man who has made the biggest impact on me since I arrived. A man who believed in me when I wasn't sure I could pull off this event in six weeks' time. A man who helped me with every last detail of this gala and took absolutely no credit for it."

Her eyes fixed on Sebastian's, her tears sparkling under the spotlight, and he was hit with a sudden sense of dread.

"He's a man of many talents ... and many faces."

His stomach dropped. She knows.

"The president of Schultz Chocolate. Sebastian Schultz, everybody." She stopped looking at him and simply walked off the stage and toward the exit, not introducing Skylar, who stood staring with her mouth hanging open as Genevieve rushed to the exit.

Sebastian heard Skylar take the stage, apologize for the confusion, and begin talking about the regatta as he bolted after Genevieve.

"Gen!" He called after her in a loud whisper, but she kept walking until they were outside. "Genevieve!"

She spun around to face him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Are you all right?"

“Of course not, Kur—” A sob interrupted her.

“I’m sorry.” His heart ached in his chest. He wanted to touch her, to take her in his arms and comfort her. Her tears were making him crazy. He hated that he’d done this to her. “You have no idea how sorry I am.”

“Why would you do this? Why not tell me who you were from the start?”

Someone walked out of the building then, and Genevieve swiped the tears from her face.

“We shouldn’t talk here,” Sebastian told her. “Let’s go somewhere more private.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you ever again.”

“Gen—”

“Don’t call me that. In fact, don’t call me anything. You lied to me about your name, so you don’t get to use mine anymore.” More tears fell.

“Please, hear me out.”

“Why should I?”

“Because there’s a good reason for what I did. I promise you.”

“I’m not sure any reason would justify someone lying like this and getting family and friends to play along with it.”

He could see how livid she was. “I’ve had a bad track record with relationships in the past.”

“I can see why.”

“Please trust me when I say I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Am I supposed to feel special?” She rolled her eyes.

“I’ve been burned before, and I wanted to get to know you and have you know me without the money coming between us.”

She shook her head in disgust. “Do you have any idea how humiliated I am right now? I trusted you.” Her voice began to raise. “I trusted your sister and Franky ... and your brother. He pretended to be you. Is this some kind of sick game you all play together?”

“It wasn’t like that.” He wanted to get down on his hands and knees and beg her to

hear him out, but if she wouldn't, could he really blame her?

"I can't deal with this." She turned and started walking away.

"Genevieve, please. I care so much about you. I've fallen in l—"

"Don't!" She spun on her heel and glared at him. "Don't you dare say it."

He could almost feel daggers from her eyes shoot through him. He took two steps toward her, which had her holding her hands up and stepping backwards to get away from him.

"It's the truth," he told her.

She let out a hysterical laugh tinged with pain. "The truth? I'm not sure you know what that is anymore."

With that, she walked away and left him on the sidewalk, staring after her. His worst nightmare had come true—but it was a nightmare of his own making.

When Monday rolled around, he wasn't sure he'd see Genevieve at all. He'd been away from his office a lot over the past six weeks, helping her with the regatta, but it brought him comfort to be there this morning. Answering calls and messages, trying to stay busy so he wouldn't think about how majorly he'd screwed up his entire future with the woman he wanted to spend it with.

He'd known he was in love with her for a while now. But now, none of that mattered. She would never speak to him again. She wouldn't even give him a chance to explain, and at this point, he didn't feel like he even deserved to be heard.

He stayed hidden away in his office all morning, immersing himself in day-to-day

tasks.

A little after two o'clock, a soft knock sounded on his door.

“Yeah, come in,” he nearly growled.

The door opened slowly to reveal Genevieve's beautiful face looking back at him.

His heart skipped a beat, and he stood as she entered. “Hi.” He couldn't hide the hope in his voice as he spoke that one little word.

“Hello.” He hated how formal she sounded.

She walked to his desk and lay a piece of paper in front of him.

He read the first line, and panic shot through his body as his eyes met hers. “Letter of resignation? You're quitting?”

“I can't stay. Not after everything.” She stared down at the letter. “I'm utterly humiliated, and there's no way I can face your family again, knowing they all knew the truth and kept it from me. I can't trust any of you anymore.”

“Genevieve, we need you here. I meant it when I said you're a breath of fresh air in this company. The regatta was the most successful fundraiser we've ever had.”

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She got a hint of a smile at that. “I’m glad.”

“You can’t leave. Schultz needs you.” He reached out and gently lifted her chin to get her to look him in the eyes. “I need you.”

“Kurt—” She paused at her mistake, then pushed his hand away. “See, I can’t even call you the right name. Your real name. I didn’t fall in love with Sebastian Schultz, and it feels wrong to call you that.”

He rounded the desk and moved toward her. “Love?”

Her cheeks immediately colored.

“You love me?” His heart warmed as he stepped closer.

“No.” She angled away from him. “I loved the man I thought you were. But that’s not who you are. I don’t even know you at all.”

“You do know me, Gen.” He stepped into her personal space and raised his hand to touch her cheek.

She tilted her face to the side, but not completely away from him. “I told you not to call me that,” she whispered.

“I fell for you too, you know.”

Her eyes met his, and though she was hurt and angry, he could see the love there.

Everything around them faded away as he leaned in, longing to press his lips to hers, to show her how much he loved her.

“No.” She shook her head and pushed against him at the last second. “Stop. This is too confusing.”

His soul ached with disappointment as he stepped back, giving her the space she asked for.

“Please accept my resignation and leave me alone.”

She flew out of the office, taking his heart with her, and he sank into the nearest chair. He’d never felt like his heart had been ripped out of his chest before, but he had to believe this is what it would feel like. The ache was excruciating. Her absence was devastating. He wasn’t sure if there was anything he could do to make her understand.

TWENTY-FOUR

After years at her former employer, she had felt no remorse at all when she finally left and moved on to a new job. But only two months had passed since she’d stepped into the Schultz building, and leaving now gutted her. The work had been wonderful and challenging, the people kind and welcoming, and she loved feeling like she was truly a part of a family and that the work she was doing actually meant something.

How could I have been so stupid?

As her final day at Schultz Chocolate was coming to a close, she gathered her belongings. Not that she had much there to gather. She took the little name plate from her desk and placed it in a box along with a couple frames containing pictures of her family and Charisma.

“I can’t believe you’re actually leaving.”

Genevieve was surprised to see Skylar standing before her with arms crossed over her chest. It was the first time she’d seen her since the regatta. She had kept to herself since giving Sebastian her notice, quietly serving her time until her two weeks were up. It had probably been foolish to think she could get out of there without seeing a Schultz.

“Yeah.” It was all she could say at the moment.

Skylar entered the room and closed the door behind her, glancing around the large office. “You sure you want to leave all this?”

Genevieve nodded and continued putting a few more things in the box.

“You can tell me what you really think of me,” Skylar said. “I can take it.”

Genevieve looked up at her then. “I feel very betrayed. By all of you. And I have to go because I don’t think I can trust you. Any of you.”

“May I tell you a story before you go?” She raised her eyebrows questioningly. “I think it will help you to understand.”

Her chest was tight, as if she might cry again, and she did not want to do that in front of Sebastian’s sister, a woman who she had thought was her friend.

Skylar took a seat in the chair across the desk, and Genevieve sat down in her desk chair.

“Bash has earned a reputation of being distant and cold for a reason. He’s kept people at arm’s length, especially women, because he’s been burned in the past. More than

once. When he loves, he loves with his whole heart, as I'm sure you know."

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Genevieve felt her cheeks warm. She did know.

“About six years ago, he thought he’d met the one. He fell hard and fast, and Serena seemed perfect for him. We all thought so. He even proposed.”

“He proposed?” It came out in a whisper. “He was engaged?”

Skylar nodded. “And that’s when everything started coming to light. She was a very good actress, making us all believe she was in love with him, planning their wedding. She kept asking for money for deposits for this or that, insisting on handling it all herself rather than our family hiring someone to do it for her.”

“Don’t the parents of the bride usually pay for the wedding?” Genevieve cut in.

“She said she was an orphan.” Skylar laughed as if that was ridiculous. “She was not.”

“Oh my gosh.”

“And the deposits weren’t used to book things for the wedding. She needed the money to pay off a debt her boyfriend back in Detroit had racked up with a bookie.”

Genevieve’s mouth fell open.

“Bash was crushed. Serena knew exactly who he was before she came into his life, acting like she’d never heard of him, putting on the sweet and innocent act. And this was on the heels of Macy, another girl he dated, who seemed more interested in his

money than him. After that, he put up walls because he thought he couldn't trust women anymore, and he hasn't dated anyone since."

"That's awful."

Skylar nodded. "It's a shame, really, because my brother has the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known, and he is so capable of love."

A tear slipped down Genevieve's cheek. "How long were he and Serena together?"

"Over a year."

"A year?"

"Yeah, it was a long con." Skylar sat forward in the chair and lay her hands on the edge of Genevieve's desk. "So, when he met you and you seemed to not know who he was—"

"He didn't want me to know he had money." She was starting to understand.

"Exactly. He wanted you to get to know him, Genevieve. Without the money or his status getting in the way. And he wanted to make sure you actually didn't know who he was and weren't playing him like Serena had. Can you understand that?"

She took in a slow breath and let it out. "Yes, but when we started getting closer, why didn't he tell me? Why did he keep letting me believe the lie?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm guessing that when he realized you were for real, he didn't want things to change. And I'm sure he was afraid of how you'd react, and he didn't want to lose you."

Genevieve groaned. “This is so frustrating, because he did it to make sure I was being honest with him, but he was lying to me the whole time.”

“If he’d told you sooner, would you have gotten as close as you are?”

“Were,” Genevieve corrected her.

Skylar gave her a disbelieving look. “Would you have?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure how I would’ve reacted, because he didn’t tell me. I had to find out on the most important day of my career.”

“I know.”

Genevieve didn’t know what else to say. She needed to think about all of this.

“I hope you’ll talk to him. Because I know he wants to talk to you.”

“Why hasn’t he?”

“You told him to leave you alone.”

She had told him that.

“He’s dying inside, Genevieve.”

Her heart clenched, hearing that. But what could she say or do?

“I’m really sorry for my part in all this,” Skylar said. “I’m sorry for lying to you.”

“I appreciate you saying that.”

“I wish you’d stay. This place won’t be the same without you.”

Genevieve hated the thought of leaving this job she’d come to love. “At my last job, I was kept in the dark about a lot of things, and once the truth came to light, I left in hopes of finding a trustworthy company to work for. And I thought I’d found that here.” Her throat tightened as she fought back tears.

“You did,” Skylar assured her.

“I trusted all of you. Yet once again, I was in the dark.”

“Genevieve.”

“I guess I must be pretty gullible since people keep doing this to me.”

“You’re not gullible, Genevieve.” Skylar’s voice was filled with sympathy.

“It feels like I am.” Genevieve paused to collect her thoughts. “But that was different. Before. That was about a job. This is even worse, because it’s personal. And that’s why I can’t stay.”

Leaving the office felt like the end of something huge, and she was so torn up about it that she didn’t go to her apartment. She drove straight to the farm. When she arrived, she went to the barn, walking down to the horse stalls, where Charisma immediately stuck her head over the door as soon as she saw Genevieve.

Genevieve rested her head against Charisma’s and tears suddenly burned her eyes. Growing up, whenever she was down, she came here, just to be with her sweet horse. Sometimes she’d talk. Sometimes she wouldn’t. Sometimes she’d ride. Other times, she’d simply stand with her or brush her. Tonight, she stood.

Charisma nudged closer, and Genevieve leaned against her, letting her move back and forth a little, as if the horse was trying to soothe her by swaying.

“I can always count on you, can’t I, girl?” She let her tears fall and stayed there for a long time. “I wish I could say the same about ... him.” She blew out an exasperated breath. “I can’t even say his name. It’s too hard. I want Kurtis back. But I can’t have him, can I? Because he doesn’t exist.”

Genevieve was unsure of how much time had passed until a few lightning bugs flew in through the door. She gazed outside and watched them flit around in the sky, and she thought about that night on the beach. That perfect, wonderful night together. Lightning bugs were ruined for her forever now.

She left the comfort of the barn and walked to the house.

Mom was seated on the porch, reading a book.

“Checking up on the horses?” she asked.

“Yeah, I stopped by the barn for a while.”

Mom laid her book down in her lap. “Are you all right?”

Genevieve took a seat in one of the rocking chairs. The west-facing porch gave them a perfect view of the sun setting over the cornfields, and she spilled the entire story from beginning to end.

She expected advice or some sort of counsel, but instead her mother sat in silence.

“I don’t know what to do now, Mom. I left this job I loved and this man who I thought I loved. Everything’s falling apart.”

Still nothing.

“You’ve never been one to keep quiet when we needed advice. Or when we didn’t. Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“I knew who he was.” Ida looked completely guilty, avoiding eye contact.

“Excuse me?” Had she heard her mother right? “You knew he was Sebastian Schultz?”

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Her mom nodded. “I saw an article about him and his siblings once. That day you brought him here, he looked familiar, and before you left, I told him I knew.”

“Mom!” Genevieve stood from the chair and stared down at her. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I could see he meant something to you, and I wanted to see how things were going to play out.”

“Play out? This is my life, Mother, not some game.”

“I know.”

“Everybody around me seems to be playing games these days.” She was fuming now.

“But you’re my mom! You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“I am on your side.”

“Then please put yourself in my shoes for a minute. You meet a really nice guy at your new job. He seems wonderful and sweet and charming, and you fall hard for him. Only he isn’t who he says he is. He’s lying to you. And worse, everybody around you knows. Your coworkers, your friends ... even your own mother. How would that make you feel?”

“Angry,” Mom replied.

“Darn right, I’m angry.”

“He told me he had a good reason, that he’d had some bad past relationships, and that he wanted more time to tell you himself.”

Genevieve shook her head. “And that’s all it took for you to keep something like this from me? Why would you go along with it?”

“I could tell he was in love with you, and I felt he could be trusted.”

“What if you’d been wrong? What if he was a crazed lunatic or something?”

“He’s not, is he?” she asked with eyebrow raised.

Genevieve didn’t reply.

“When I realized who he was, I was relieved,” Ida told her.

“Relieved? About what?”

“That you’d finally found someone, and that you’d have a man who could afford to take care of you. Someone who could give you a happy, comfortable life.”

“Pfft! I don’t need a rich man to have a happy life.”

“I’m not saying you do, but it will sure make a lot of things easier for you.”

She couldn’t believe what her mom was saying. “You know what, Mom ... I don’t need a man at all to be happy. I’ve never been one who’s out searching for a husband and you know it. Even though, all my life you’ve been trying to make me look how you thought I needed to look to get one. Finding a man is not God’s sole purpose for my life. If I meet someone ...” She thought she already had. “I would be happy to spend my life with a loving and honest man, but that is not Sebastian Schultz.”

“I’m sorry, Genny. I really thought he would have told you sooner.”

“Well, he didn’t.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stared across the farmyard.

“He was here, you know.”

She looked at her mom again. “Here? When?”

“He stopped by to talk to me a few days ago.”

Her eyebrows narrowed in confusion. “What did he want?”

“To apologize for lying about who he was.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. “He apologized to you?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you mention that earlier in this conversation?”

“I wanted to hear the story from your perspective. He told me his reasons and that you found out the truth before he could tell you. He said he was more sorry than he could ever say, and he hoped I would forgive him for the deception.”

Tears began to burn her eyes. She couldn’t believe he had come there.

“Did you at least talk to him before you left?” Mom asked.

Genevieve swallowed hard. “No.”

“I think you should.”

She walked to the edge of the porch, staring out at the bright orange sky. “Why should I?”

“Because he loves you. And you love him.”

“I do not love Sebastian.” With each roll of his name off her tongue, it was getting easier to associate Sebastian with the face of the man she’d come to know as Kurtis. She pictured his face then. His eyes staring into hers, the curve of his jawline, the feel of his lips against hers. Her stomach fluttered. Sebastian. It hurt to even think his name.

At first, she kept picturing Gus's face, because he was the one she had thought was Sebastian. That was part of the reason this was so confusing. Realizing that the man in the office that day, the man at dinner and at the club, the man who showed up drunk at the beach house—Sebastian's family's beach house—was actually Augustus.

“Genevieve, you are the most forgiving person I know, and you have a huge heart. Bigger than the rest of us combined.”

Her mother didn't usually compliment her, and her words were both surprising and touching.

“You should hear him out.”

“I don't know, Mom.” Yes, apologizing to her mom was a decent thing to do, but it didn't make up for the many lies he'd told.

“Maybe you won't like what he has to say, but then you'll know, and you can move on.”

She hated the thought of moving on, but she hated being lied to more.

Mom didn't say anything more about that. She stood and walked up beside Genevieve, put her arm around her back, and drew her into her side. “I'm sorry if I ever made you feel that you weren't enough without a man. I was just very happy with your father, and I want the same happiness for my girls.”

“I know, Mom. I know you want the best for us, but sometimes you go about it the wrong way.”

“I'll try to be better.”

“Thank you.”

“I love you, Genny.”

“I love you too, Mom.” Genevieve turned into her mom and hugged her tight. She felt tears threatening again, but this time they weren’t because of Sebastian Schultz.

Genevieve snuggled up on her couch under a fuzzy pink blanket, flipping through the channels but not actually watching. She had planned a perfectly good day of lying around and feeling sorry for herself. The job search was not going well so far. After a couple of interviews that had amounted to nothing, she’d expanded her search outside of the Grand Rapids area. She loved living here, but the idea of relocating didn’t bother her as much when she thought about escaping the memories. So far, though, she hadn’t gotten any nibbles on her résumé.

As she was about to settle in and watch the local news at noon, her phone rang.

“Hi, can I speak to Genevieve Willis?” the voice on the line said.

“This is Genevieve.”

“Hi, this is Cal from Kalispell Horse Rescue. Do you remember me?”

She sat up quickly, dropping the television remote onto the floor. “Cal? Of course I remember you. It’s been a long time.”

“Sure has. You were just a teenager last time I saw you.”

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“I know. That was such a great summer.”

“You were such a help around here, especially with the horses,” he said.

“How’s Ruby? I miss her home-cooked meals.”

“She’s doing well. Still cooking. Still griping at me every day, but I love her.”

Genevieve laughed, fondly remembering the owners and their propensity for bickering.

“What ever happened to Roman?” she asked.

“Roman? Oh, that was the summer you were here?”

“Yeah. I’ve wondered about him from time to time.”

“Why don’t you come on out and see for yourself?” Cal replied.

“I’d love to come visit sometime.”

“I got your résumé a while back,” he told her.

“Yeah. I was looking for a fundraising coordinator job. That’s what I do now.”

“I know. That’s why I’m calling.”

“It is?” Her heart began to beat faster.

“Yes. We have a position available.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Three days. That’s all the time it took to pack up her belongings and finalize arrangements to move to Kalispell, Montana. Mom and Rhonda had been beyond excited for her and sent her off with hugs and kisses. Above everyone else in Michigan, Charisma was the hardest to leave. She’d spent extra time saying goodbye to her, promising to come back and visit as often as she could until she could make arrangements to move her out to Montana too.

Her drive across the country had been torture, because in the back of her mind was this little niggling longing to call Sebastian and tell him her good news. He would have been so excited for her, even with her moving to another state and away from him, because that’s who he was. Supportive and caring. At least, that’s who she thought he was, and it killed her that she questioned those qualities in him. She wanted to believe that not everything about him was a lie, but the deception had been too great. Hadn’t it?

Settling in at the horse rescue in Kalispell was easy and comfortable. They had expanded over the years and made improvements to the existing building and barns, making it possible to help more horses than before. Cal and Ruby welcomed her in, taking her around to meet all the horses that were currently housed there as well as the staff who were working with them. She got to work right away on raising funds for new equipment to care for the horses, repairs to some of the fences, veterinarian services, and so much more. The needs were great to heal these horses that had been so horribly neglected and injured.

As each day passed, she fell more and more in love with the work. Yet the empty

space in her heart still remained.

On a lovely morning in late August, Genevieve strolled along the horse paddock to the barn. The sun glowed warm from its place low in the sky, taking the chill out of the air and ridding the ground of the dew.

“Morning, Genevieve,” Cal greeted her as he came from the barn.

“Morning.”

“I’d like you to ride along with me for a bit.” He motioned for her to follow him to his truck.

“Really?” She followed along to the other side of the barn, thinking they’d be picking up a horse, but she noticed the trailer wasn’t attached to his truck. “We’re not going to get a horse?”

“Making a house call,” he explained.

“Oh, all right.”

Cal drove about ten miles down the road and turned into a long driveway with wide open fields on either side, surrounded by fences. A few horses were roaming around, nibbling on grass. He stopped the truck in front of a barn and climbed out.

A teenage girl emerged from within.

“Hey, Libby,” Cal said. “This is Genevieve.”

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“Hi,” Libby replied. “Perfect timing. We’re just in from a ride.” She spun on her heel and headed back into the barn.

Genevieve followed along behind the young girl, who reminded her a lot of her younger self with her long blonde braids and petite frame.

“Here he is.” Libby patted her horse on the side.

“He’s beautiful.” Genevieve’s eyes traveled over his shiny brown coat and black mane to his face. Her gaze suddenly locked on a small white patch in the middle of his forehead shaped like a perfect heart, and she gasped. “Wait, is this ...” Her mouth fell open and her eyes shot to Cal, who was grinning ear to ear. “This isn’t Roman, is it?”

“One and the same,” Cal replied with a nod.

Her hands covered her mouth and unexpected tears threatened. “Oh my gosh.” She slowly moved closer. “I can’t believe it. He looks amazing. Like nothing ever happened to him.”

“My parents adopted him from the rescue when I was a baby, and he’s been my horse since I was old enough to ride,” Libby explained.

Genevieve moved closer to the strong, healthy horse before her, remembering him struggling to survive, not an ounce of fat on him, mane ratted and falling out.

She turned toward Cal as she choked back tears. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“You’re welcome.” He gave her an understanding smile.

“Thank you for helping take care of him,” Libby said, “and for not letting him die.”

Genevieve smiled then turned back to Roman. As she stood there with tears streaming down her cheeks, running her hand over the muscles of his back, along his full mane, and up to the heart shape on his head, she knew in her heart that Montana was exactly the place she was meant to be.

“Ready for lunch?”

Genevieve glanced up from her desk. “You heard my stomach growling, didn’t you?”

Her new friend and coworker, Marianne, chuckled.

Genevieve grabbed her purse and walked out of the tiny office she now called her own. She didn’t mind that it was small or that she was making far less than she had been at Schultz Chocolate. This job had come at just the right time in her life, and she considered every part of it a blessing.

Marianne was older than her by about ten years, but they had become instant friends and were quickly making their twice weekly lunches at Sit A Spell, the local diner, a tradition.

“The usual?” The waitress called out when they walked in, and they each answered with a nod. They’d only been coming there together for a couple weeks, and already they were considered regulars. It was one of the things Genevieve loved about living in this city.

“The kids are excited about going on the Red Bus Tour this weekend,” Marianne said as she took a seat at their usual table. “We’ve lived here our whole lives and never

done it.”

“Thanks for going with me. It’ll be fun.” The mountains of Glacier National Park were basically Kalispell’s backyard, and Genevieve was excited to explore their beauty. Marianne had mentioned the Red Buses were a good way to see portions of the park without having to drive themselves, and Genevieve loved the history of the buses, many having been in service since the 1930s.

“I’m so glad you came to work here,” Marianne told her as the waitress placed a Sprite in front of her and a Coke in front of Genevieve. “I liked working at the rescue before you came, but I’ve always wanted a best friend, and I feel like God placed you in my life for a reason.”

Genevieve smiled. “I feel the same. My sister and I are very close, and we’ve never lived this far away from each other, so I was praying that I’d find a good friend when I came here to help with missing her.”

“I’m sure it’s hard to be away from your family. What made you come all the way to Montana instead of finding work in Michigan?”

“I’m sure I could’ve found a job closer to home, but I think I needed the distance.”

“From what?”

Genevieve paused. It hurt to think about, let alone to say it aloud. “From a guy who hurt me.”

“Ah, I had a feeling.”

“But that’s not the only reason. I loved volunteering here when I was in high school, and I wanted this job. And after seeing Roman this morning, I know I made the right

decision.”

“Well, I want you to know that if you ever need to talk, I’m here for you. I’m a pretty good listener. My hubby will tell you it’s one of the reasons he fell in love with me. He likes to talk, and I like to listen.” She chuckled.

“It’s kind of a strange story. I’m not sure I’m quite ready to talk about it yet, but I will tell you one day, Marianne. Because I know one of these days this whole thing is going to come crashing down on me, and even though I seem okay right now, I know I’m not completely done crying over Sebastian Schultz.”

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Marianne looked up from taking a sip of her drink. “Did you say Sebastian Schultz?”

“Yeah, from the chocolate company. That’s the guy.”

“Huh.” Marianne had a funny look on her face. “I didn’t realize ...”

“Didn’t realize what?”

“Sebastian Schultz is the reason you got the job here.”

Genevieve nearly spit a chunk of french fry out of her mouth. “What do you mean?”

“He sent Cal a glowing letter of recommendation. Ruby showed it to me. He went on about your love for horses, how you’d worked here when you were younger, and he gushed about all your accomplishments at his company. He told all about the regatta you put on and all the money the fundraiser brought in. He said this was the job you were meant to do, and Cal would be a fool not to hire you.”

“But I sent my résumé to the rescue months ago, before I even got the Schultz Chocolate job. I thought that’s why Cal called.”

“Your résumé was filed away after they filled that position. Sebastian’s letter arrived the day after the position became available again.”

Genevieve stared at her plate, letting Marianne’s words sink in. She couldn’t believe he’d done that, and her heart began to ache.

“God has such a wonderful way of working things out, doesn’t He?”

She looked up at Marianne, who was smiling at her.

“Yeah.” Her lips were beginning to turn up in a smile too. “He sure does.”

TWENTY-SIX

On a perfect Labor Day Monday, with puffy clouds floating across a blue sky and a perfect warm breeze coming in off of Lake Michigan, Sebastian sat on the bottom step of the stairs leading up to his family’s beach house. Boats dotted the lake, but his eyes weren’t on the water, they were fixed on the spot on the beach just yards away where he had kissed Genevieve for the first time.

He felt her absence every day. She’d left Schultz Chocolate weeks ago, without a word to him. He had respected her wishes and left her alone, even though everything within him wanted to pick up the phone and call or text, or better yet, show up at her apartment to take her in his arms and kiss it all away.

August had been the longest month of his life. The days had crawled by so slowly, he swore the clock was mocking him. He’d tried to concentrate on work, but all he could do was stare at the screen or out the window at the river below. He’d stopped by her old office a few times and stared at the empty chair, remembering her sitting in that seat with her feet up on the desk, looking so stunningly beautiful. From day one, she had taken his breath away. He had tried going up on the roof to clear his head, but he pictured her sitting under the pergola, writing in her notepad, making lists, and crossing things off. He thought he’d smelled her scent floating toward him on the wind that day. It had probably been the flowers in the garden, but he could’ve sworn it was her.

He hated summer. This season was both the beginning and end of the most wonderful

relationship of his life. It had brought the most amazing woman into his life, the one he truly wanted to spend forever with, but now she was gone.

It was his fault. He knew that and took complete responsibility for it.

Skylar, Gus, and Franky had accepted his apology for asking them to lie for him. Even Ida Willis understood his reasons for keeping the truth from her daughter and had forgiven him. But the person he wanted forgiveness from the most wanted nothing to do with him.

Skylar had confessed that she'd spilled his engagement-gone-wrong story to Genevieve, which upset him at first. He wished he'd been the one to tell her, but he understood that his sister was only trying to help Genevieve understand his thought process.

But still, she had left. She hadn't reached out to him in any way since she'd gone. He knew he had hurt her deeply, but it broke his heart all over again.

He thought back to his engagement to Serena. There was simply no comparison. Even in the early days, when he believed she truly loved him, the feelings he had for her were only the slightest hum in comparison to the resounding chorus that was his love for Genevieve.

He loved her so much that he had let her go. So she could move on with her life. But there was no way he ever could. He would always love her. There would be no one else for him.

His eyes closed as he basked in the warmth of the sun. The lake made him feel calm during a time when he felt anything but. He breathed in the fresh air, ignoring the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs behind him.

“Tommy Turtle?” A sweet voice sounded in his ear.

His eyes shot open, and he looked up at the most beautiful face on earth holding a cup of ice cream. “Genevieve?”

She stepped down and took a seat next to him, handing him the cup with a spoon sticking out the top.

“How did you know where to find me?”

“Skylar.” She took a bite of her Peanut Pirate and glanced over at him. “That’s gonna melt.”

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He took a bite just for her, but all he wanted was to hear her voice.

“I had to find you,” she said finally.

His heart surged with hope. “Gen, I’m so sorry. I just—”

“I moved to Montana,” she spit out.

“Montana?” He pretended not to know what she was talking about and took a bite instead.

“Remember that horse rescue I told you about? They had an opening, and they offered me the job.”

His heart soared for her. “That’s wonderful. I’m so happy for you.” He swallowed a chunk of ice cream and pecan, feeling her eyes on him.

She wasn’t saying anything, so he looked over at her. She’d seemed so lighthearted since she arrived, that he didn’t expect to see tears streaming down her face.

“Gen, don’t cry.” He set the cup down and put his arm around her, wiping a tear from her cheek.

She looked over at him. “I know it was because of you. I know it was your letter of recommendation that got me the job.”

He rested his forehead against hers. “I hoped it would help. It’s the perfect job for

you. I know how much you wanted it.”

She wiped at her face, moving her head away from his. “My mom told me you apologized to her.”

He nodded. “I didn’t deserve her forgiveness or her kindness.”

“Look, I know why you did it. Skylar told me about Serena.”

“Yeah, she said she told you.”

“I’ve thought a lot about it, and I’ll never know what it’s like to have someone only care about me for my money, but I tried to put myself in your shoes. To see it all from your perspective. I know you wanted to make sure I wasn’t after your money, and for once in your life, you didn’t want a woman to have any preconceived notions about you before you dated her.”

“Yes.”

“I understand. I do. But it still hurts, Sebastian.”

He closed his eyes and sighed. “Say it again.”

“It still hurts,” she repeated.

His eyes opened, and he looked deep into hers. “My name.”

Her lips curved into a little smile. “Sebastian,” she whispered.

His hand moved up to cup her cheek, and without hesitation, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. He was scared she’d pull away at first, but she did the opposite. She

rested her hand on his chest and sank into the kiss.

He slid his fingers into the hair at the base of her neck and pulled her toward him, needing to be closer. Her lips were so soft against his as they kissed for long minutes, their breaths mingling, their hearts beating together. It felt so good, he was afraid he would suddenly awaken from a dream. But she was real. He could see her, feel her, taste her. She was right there with him, her hand sliding up into his hair, pressing her body closer as she moved her lips against his.

It was arguably the best kiss of his life.

Until he felt something cold in his lap and yanked his mouth away to discover her cup had tipped and was now pouring melted Peanut Pirate Sundae into his lap.

She giggled as he grabbed the cup and tossed it in the sand, swiping the sticky ice cream away. “Sorry.” Her giggles turned to laughter, and it was the best sound he’d ever heard.

“What am I gonna do with you?” He shook his head and stood.

She joined him, and he suddenly grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up over his shoulder.

She let out a loud whoop. “What are you doing?”

“Rinsing off.”

“I don’t have ice cream on my lap,” she cried as she beat on his lower back with her fists, laughing the whole time.

He walked down the beach with her over his shoulder and into the water, dropping her next to him.

He reached down and wetted his hands, wiping at the mess on his shorts. A sudden splash soaked his front side, and he looked up at Genevieve with a devious smile, then proceeded to kick water at her. “Payback, darling.”

They splashed and splashed, like they had almost three months before when they’d first come to the lake together.

When they were sufficiently soaked, she stepped closer. “Say it again,” she said.

“Payback.” He smirked.

She shook her head. “The other.”

He slid his arms around her waist and pulled her close again, leaning his forehead against hers. “Darling,” he whispered.

She kissed him this time. Soft and slow. Slick from the water.

He hoped this meant that she had forgiven him, but he really wanted to hear her say

it.

They walked together onto the beach and continued along the shore. He looked over at her and sighed. She was so pretty. He'd always thought so. But after the thought of never being with her had crushed him, he thought she was even prettier than before.

They walked along in silence for a while, and he was just enjoying being next to her again.

"Montana's far," he finally said.

"Not too far for someone with a fancy private jet." Her eyes met his.

"Are you saying you'd want me to visit you?" The hope was back, racing forward faster than Charisma's gallop.

Her fingers suddenly slid between his and curled around his hand, and he thought his heart might burst with happiness. "Does that answer your question?"

He smiled. "I might need to hear you say it."

"Say what?" she asked.

He stopped walking, causing her to stop as well. "That you forgive me. Because I need to know you do. I need to know that you forgive me for making the stupidest mistake of my life. I'm not a liar, Gen, and I don't know what made me think deceiving you was a good idea. I know I had reasons, which I thought were legitimate at the time, but I know it's never okay to be dishonest, especially about who you really are. And even worse, I got others involved. I would understand if you were never able to trust me again, and I—"

“Shhh.” Genevieve stepped forward and lay her finger against his lips.

His heartbeat stuttered at her touch.

“In case you didn’t already know ... I’m in love with you, Sebastian Schultz.”

His lips fell open at the enormity of her admission. Had he heard her right? This couldn’t be happening. Not after all he’d put her through.

“Did you hear me?” She had so much love in her eyes. “All I wanted to do when I got the job was call and tell you, because I knew how happy you’d be for me. I was excited to be in Montana, doing what I always wanted to do, but it felt like I left part of my heart behind. And when I heard about your letter, I realized that I’d already forgiven you, and I had to tell you.”

“I don’t deserve it,” he managed.

“After everything you’ve been through in the past, you absolutely do.”

His eyes began to sting as tears surfaced.

“Bass.” She gazed up at him adoringly.

He looked at her through blurry eyes. “Nobody’s ever called me that before.”

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“Well, I know your family calls you Bash, and I thought I should have something only I call you, but I didn’t think you’d want me to call you Sea Bass.”

He shook with laughter, and a tear slid down his cheek.

She gave him a sweet smile and gently wiped his tear away. “Bass,” she whispered as she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.

He gathered her closer to him, cementing their relationship with his kisses, wanting her to know that he loved her more than ever and would always be there for her.

“I love you,” he whispered.

She made a sweet little cooing sound, and he deepened the kiss until they were both breathless.

He took her face in his hands and looked her in the eyes as seriously as he could. “I will never lie to you again. I promise you.”

She nodded. “I believe you.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

He smiled and took her hand again, turning around and walking back to the site of their first real date.

She glanced up at the house then smiled at him.

He watched as she started climbing the steps. “Where do you think you’re going, beautiful?”

“To my boyfriend’s beach house.”

“Is that so?” He liked the sound of boyfriend coming off her tongue.

“Yeah, he has a really nice hot tub.” She winked and took the stairs two at a time.

He grinned as he chased after her. This day had definitely turned out much better than how it started.

TWENTY-SEVEN

A month had passed since Genevieve first came back to Michigan from Montana to see Sebastian. He knew she was where she was meant to be, doing what she was meant to do, but he missed her. The distance was getting to him already. Phone calls and text messages helped, as did the trip he’d taken to Montana two weeks ago, but a weekend visit was not long enough. Two days together would never be enough.

At the moment, he stood at the small airport in Hastings waiting for the Schultz private jet to arrive. He’d gotten there extra early and was anxious to see Genevieve’s lovely face and get her back in his arms again. He’d insisted on flying her home for a visit, which she’d happily agreed to.

When the jet finally came into view after what seemed a lifetime of scanning the skies, he had to rein in his excitement or he’d rush right onto the runway to get to her before the plane ever landed. And once that plane had landed and the hatch opened, Genevieve did just that, practically running toward him.

“Bass!” The sound of her voice was more than enough to calm the nervous excitement he felt every time he saw her.

He opened his arms and cracked up laughing as she jumped up and wrapped her arms and legs around him. His arms locked around her back as he held her in place, and they stood like that for a long minute, holding each other, loving the feeling of being together again.

“I missed you,” she whispered, her lips tickling his ear.

He squeezed her tighter. “I missed you more.”

She pulled away to look into his eyes. “Not possible.”

He lowered her to the ground as she unwound from him, and he took her face in his hands and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. Then another. And another.

She smiled at his sweet show of affection.

His fingers laced with hers, and he took her bag and led her toward his car. “Are you hungry?”

“Famished.”

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“Good. I thought we’d go somewhere special for dinner.”

“Where?” she replied with excitement in her eyes.

He opened the door of his Mercedes and let her in. “Nice try.”

She stuck her bottom lip out, which made him laugh.

“I think you’ll like it,” he said.

Sebastian drove through the town of Hastings, and a smile spread across Genevieve’s face.

“Are we going to Nashville. We could eat at The Country Kettle.”

“We have other plans.”

“Is that so?”

He turned onto the road to her parents’ farm, and she couldn’t stop grinning.

“I thought you’d like to see Charisma.”

“I love you,” she told him.

He smiled over at her. “I will never get tired of hearing you say that.”

“Good, because I’ll never stop saying it.”

He reached over and softly touched her cheek then lowered his hand to rest on her knee, which she took between her hands.

When they pulled into the driveway, Mom and Rhonda stood side by side outside the barn, holding the reins of Charisma and Buddy, who were all saddled up and ready to ride.

Genevieve walked over and hugged them both at the same time.

“Welcome home,” Mom said.

“Missed you, sis,” Rhonda told her.

She glanced over her shoulder at Sebastian as he caught up. “You are so sneaky.”

He shrugged. She had no idea.

She moved closer to Charisma and took the reins from Rhonda, running her hand along the side of her horse’s head. “Hey, girl. Miss me?”

Charisma chose that moment to whinny, and they all laughed.

“We better get going,” Sebastian said as he climbed up onto Buddy.

Genevieve followed suit, climbing into Charisma’s saddle.

“Have a nice ride,” Mom said as Genevieve began to ride her horse down the path.

Sebastian looked over at Ida and Rhonda, who both had huge smiles on their faces.

Rhonda nodded toward the barn and gave him a thumbs up. “Thank you,” he mouthed as he got Buddy going to catch up to Genevieve.

They took it slow going along the path they’d ridden together before. After what happened to Charisma’s leg, Genevieve was very careful with her now.

“That was sweet, you calling ahead to have them get the horses ready for us.” Genevieve smiled over at him.

The late afternoon sun lit her hair like a golden halo around her head, making her look even more angelic than she usually did.

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“We only have a couple days together, and I want to make the most of every minute.”

“Me too.”

They moved along the path to where it narrowed into the woods and rode for a while, just talking about the two weeks since they’d seen each other, sharing the everyday things like their jobs, and anything else they thought of. It was wonderful to be able to talk so openly and honestly with her now, unlike the last time they’d ridden this trail together.

As they followed the curve in the path, Genevieve gasped and pulled on Charisma’s reins to stop.

“What is that?”

Sebastian climbed down from Buddy, walked him over to a nearby tree, and tied his reins to one of the branches, then motioned for Genevieve to follow. Once the horses were secured, he took her hand in his and led her to a small clearing under a giant oak tree.

A table for two was set up with a white linen table cloth and napkins, fancy china dinnerware, crystal wine glasses, and a vase of autumn flowers in the center. Hanging from the branches above were a dozen black lanterns, holding lit candles. To the side of the table was a blanket spread out with a few fluffy pillows leaning up against the tree. Everything was just as Sebastian had asked Ida, Rhonda, and Skylar to make it.

“This is ...” Genevieve took a seat when Sebastian pulled it out for her. “I have no

words.”

“You like it?”

“Nobody has ever done something so romantic for me. Ever.”

He opened the basket, removed their dinner—grilled salmon and roasted vegetables with salad on the side—and placed it on the dishes. The smile on her face when she inhaled the delicious scent of their meal made it all worthwhile.

“Bon appetit.”

She took a bite of the salmon and let out a satisfied sigh. “Oh my gosh. So good.”

“I had Sky bring it down from Bonefish Grill. I almost ordered us Chilean Sea Bass.”

Genevieve snorted a laugh. “That would have been funny.”

“I didn’t know if you would like that, but you did mention salmon once.”

“I’ve never had it before. Maybe next time.”

He smiled and took a bite of salmon. She was right, it was delicious.

“So, is there any news on Gus’s law suit?”

“Franky’s dad is meeting with Milton’s attorney this week, hoping to either get him to drop the charges or come up with a settlement Milton will agree to.”

Genevieve rolled her eyes. “This Milton guy sounds like a real winner.”

“He’s been nothing but a thorn in our side since he came into Skylar’s life.”

“I hope and pray he drops the charges so Gus can move on,” she replied.

“Me too. He seems to be doing better since he came home this time.”

“I’m glad. I want to get to know your brother for who he really is, not who I thought he was.”

“I want that too. I want you to get to know my whole family.”

“I’d like that.”

They talked and laughed comfortably through dinner. Sebastian had never felt so at ease with a woman in his life. It was the best feeling to be himself and know she was being herself with him as well.

After dinner, he reached into the basket again, revealed some Schultz Chocolate truffles, and handed her one.

She took it happily. “It’s not cherry, is it?”

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He shrugged. "You'll have to take a bite and see."

"I know you wouldn't do that to me." She paused an inch from putting it in her mouth. "Should I be careful when I bite into this?"

He eyed her with confusion.

"I'm not gonna break a tooth on a diamond ring rolled inside one of these truffles, am I?"

He went still. "Uh ... I think it's a little early to be talking about engagement, don't you?"

She reached across the table and touched his hand. "I was kidding. But that totally happened to a friend of mine in college. It wasn't a truffle, but her boyfriend put the ring inside her favorite kind of cookie, and she chipped a tooth when she took a bite before he could stop her."

He started laughing. "You don't have to worry about chipping a tooth ... yet." He thought he saw a hint of disappointment behind her eyes, but it was gone just as quickly as it had come.

As she ate another truffle, Sebastian stood and walked around the tree and returned holding a guitar in his hand.

Genevieve started clapping. "Oh, yay! I've been dying to hear you play ever since I remembered Franky's mom saying you auctioned off guitar lessons at last year's

fundraiser.”

Sebastian took a seat on the blanket, rested back against the pillows, and patted the space beside him.

She popped another truffle in her mouth and hurried over, settling in beside him.

Before he played, he leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips.

“Or maybe the guitar can wait,” she whispered.

He chuckled as he pressed the fingers of his left hand against the fretboard and began to pluck the strings with his right.

Genevieve sat still next to him. He glanced over at her every once in a while as he played. Sometimes she was smiling, other times her eyes were closed as she took in the music. These were perfect moments he would always remember.

After several songs, she suddenly shifted and lay her hand over the one he was strumming with.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked when she removed the guitar from his hands and carefully placed it on the ground behind her.

“Okay, you’ve properly wooed me. Now kiss me already.”

He rolled over, wrapping her up in his arms as they sank back into the pillows together. “So bossy,” he replied just before he gave her what she wanted.

TWENTY-EIGHT

They stayed under the big oak tree for a while, talking and kissing and enjoying their time together. When the sun dipped low in the sky, they headed back. As they neared the barn, Genevieve was confused when Sebastian hopped down off of Buddy before they rounded the corner and tied him to one of the fence posts. He then walked over and took Charisma by the harness, leading her to stand next to Buddy.

She had no idea what he was doing, but she climbed down from her horse.

“Wait here, okay,” Sebastian told her.

A confused expression crossed her face. “O-kay.”

“No peeking,” he called back over his shoulder as he led Charisma into the barn.

Genevieve patted Buddy on the back and smoothed her hand over his silky coat. “What is he up to, Bud?”

After several long minutes, Sebastian returned and held his hand out to her.

Curiously, she followed him around the barn toward the stable and noticed a soft glow coming from within. As they got closer, she saw sheer white curtains hanging from the doorway, tied back with sashes, gently blowing in the breeze. Her steps slowed as she moved through the entrance and took in everything before her.

White rose petals were strewn about the floor, and strings of twinkly white lights hung vertically from the ceiling along the length of the barn, lighting the entire space with a warm, romantic glow.

Genevieve glanced over at Charisma, who was back in her stall, her head sticking over the door, watching them.

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“What is all this?” She couldn’t take her eyes off how beautiful their simple barn looked.

“It’s been one month. One month since you took me back. One month since you told me you love me.”

She smiled over her shoulder at him. “Our one month anniversary? That’s a pretty good reason for celebration.”

He came up behind her and slid his arms around her waist, and she grabbed hold of them, leaning her head back against his chest.

“You spoil me.” She smiled as he nuzzled her neck.

“Get used to it.”

When Charisma neighed, Genevieve went to her. “Do you like all the lights, girl? Aren’t they pretty?”

She had never seen such a beautiful sight or met such a thoughtful, romantic man. When she turned around to tell him that very thing, her eyes went from the empty space where Sebastian had been standing to the place where he was now kneeling on the floor, holding a small teal box with a sparkly diamond ring inside.

Her hands flew to her mouth. “Oh my gosh!” Her words were muffled.

“I told myself I’d wait a while to do this, but I’ve known since the day I met you and

you called me Sea Bass that you were the one for me.”

Genevieve started laughing. “I told you I was sorry about that. I didn’t know who you were.”

He laughed along with her. “Since that day, I’ve fallen in love with your kindness, your sense of humor, your intelligence, your to-do lists—”

Genevieve giggled and made a checkmark in the air with her hand, like she was marking something off her list.

“Your love for your family, the way you love Charisma and all the horses you work with. Your beautiful heart won me over completely.

“I will forever regret the pain I caused you—” She tried to wave him off, but he continued. “The fact that you forgave me says so much about who you are. And I want you in my life, Gen. Now and forever.”

She began to sniffle as tears filled her eyes and spilled over.

“I love you, Genevieve Willis. More than I can ever express in words. More than my Great Granny’s truffles.”

She laughed through the tears.

“Will you marry me?”

Her eyes fixed on the round diamond solitaire in the box, then on his face, and her head began to move slowly up and down, over and over, until she was quickly nodding. “Yes. Yes. Yes!” She crashed into him and knocked him onto his backside as she wrapped herself around him like she had at the airport.

He laughed and held her tightly in his lap.

“Yes, I’ll marry you,” she whispered into his ear, lingering there, pressing soft kisses across his cheek.

He pulled her so they were face to face again and brushed a tear from her cheek before leaning in to kiss his fiancée on the lips for the first time.

She hadn’t expected a proposal. Not this soon. But every time they were together, every time she was in his arms, kissing like they were doing at the moment, it felt more right than anything in her life ever had.

When their kisses slowed, he rested his forehead against hers. “Want me to put the ring on your finger?”

She leaned back as he moved his hand, which was still gripping the box, so she could see the ring.

“It’s absolutely beautiful.”

“Do you like it?”

“What’s not to like?” It had to be at least three karats and was the sparkliest ring she’d ever seen.

He took the ring from within and slipped it onto her left ring finger. “Perfect.”

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She loved the way he was looking at the ring as he held her hand in his palm, his index finger tracing along the ring's band.

"I can't believe we're engaged. Already." She looked into his eyes. "Is it too soon? Are we rushing things? You said yourself, it's only been a month."

He shook his head. "I'm ready to be your husband." He tightened his grip on her, pulling her flush against him again, leaning in for more kisses. But they were soon interrupted by a loud whinny from Charisma, which had them laughing.

"All right, girl. I know you want attention too." She climbed off of Sebastian's lap and went to her horse, rubbing along Charisma's neck, while Sebastian brought Buddy in, put away the saddle, and got him tucked in his stall for the night.

Genevieve stepped into the center of the barn and gazed up at all the lights. "They look a little like fireflies." The place felt magical. "What made you decide to propose here?"

Sebastian came to stand facing her. "Well, I know you and your dad bonded over the horses, and riding with him was special to you. I thought being here, asking in front of Charisma, could be my way of asking for his blessing." He glanced back at her horse. "And Charisma's."

She felt tears threatening again and took hold of his hands. "My dad would have loved you, Sebastian. And I know if he was still here, he would have welcomed you into our family with open arms. He had the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known."

“I wish I’d known him.” He squeezed her hands.

“Your sister told me that same thing about you once.”

“What?”

“That you had the biggest heart of anyone she knew.”

He gave her the cute closed-mouth smile she had come to love. The one he gave when he was shy about a compliment or humble over a great accomplishment.

“She was right. I’ve never known a man with such a loving, giving heart.”

“Then you’re going to love me even more after you hear what I have to say next.”

Her brow furrowed. “More surprises?” The thought made her giddy. Everything about tonight had been so unexpected.

“I know it’s not normal for the groom to tell the bride what he’s getting her for her wedding gift, but I thought you’d want to know that I’m making a sizable donation to the Horse Rescue in your name.”

Her jaw dropped. “Sebastian.”

“What good is all this money if we don’t use it to help others.”

Tears filled her eyes again. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say you love me.”

She smiled and stood on her tiptoes to place a soft kiss on his lips. “I love you.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off the ground. “Think of all the good we’ll do together.”

Her heart was overwhelmed with love for this man, who gave without a second thought just to make her happy. She couldn’t believe she almost let him go.

TWENTY-NINE

You haven’t told me where you’re taking me today.” Genevieve lifted her left hand and admired her ring.

“It’s a surprise.”

“Another surprise? I don’t know if anything can top last night.”

Sebastian took her hand in his and brought it to his lips, gently kissing her finger just below the diamond. Never had he felt more proud than seeing her wear that ring, showing the world she was his.

He drove the car up his parents’ driveway. This was the first time he had brought Genevieve here, and he didn’t have to tell her where they were. The look on her face told him that she already knew.

“Your parents’ house?”

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He nodded. “That’s okay, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

He got out of the car and ran around to open the door for his future wife.

She turned so her legs were out of the car but remained seated. “I haven’t seen them since the regatta. Did they know you were proposing?” It looked like she shivered for a second.

“Are you cold?” The weather outside was mild for an early October day.

“I still get chills when I think about it. You proposed. We’re getting married, Sebastian.” She stared at him with wide eyes and held up her left hand. “Married!”

He tugged her up to standing and brought her hand to his mouth again, kissing her knuckles and then her ring finger. “I know. I can’t wait.”

A smile spread across her face.

“And yes, they knew I was going to propose.” He tilted his head toward the house. “Come on. Let’s go see your future in-laws.”

She slid her hand around the back of his neck and pulled his head down so she could kiss his lips. Happiness buzzed through his body like an electrical current. He felt high. High on life. High on Genevieve. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

They walked into the house together, hand in hand, smiling like lovesick fools.

The door flung open before they reached it, and Skylar bolted toward them, grabbing Genevieve's left hand. "I knew you'd say yes!" She flung her arms around the two of them. "I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks, Sky," Sebastian said. "Can we at least get inside the house first?"

They laughed together as they entered.

"Gus here yet?" he asked Skylar.

She looked worried. "Not yet."

Gerard was standing to the side of the door, taking everyone's coats.

"Thanks, Gerard," Sebastian said. "Genevieve, this is Gerard, our butler."

"Nice to meet you, Gerard," she held her hand out, and he shook it.

"Lovely to meet you too, Miss Willis."

"Soon to be Mrs. Schultz." Genevieve held her hand out to show Gerard the ring.

Sebastian beamed from the pride that filled him in that moment. He loved that she was happy and bragging about their upcoming marriage. How fortunate was he to have found her and that she agreed to be his wife.

When they were further into the house, she leaned close and whispered, "Your butler's name is Gerard? Like Gerard Butler, the actor?" She laughed at her own joke.

He smiled over at her. Never knowing what she was going to say next was one of the things he loved most about her.

“Also ... you have a butler.” She shook her head.

“He’s more of a household manager, really.”

She gave him an adorable little eye roll.

Mom and Dad were in the living room when the three of them entered, and they both stood to welcome them.

“It’s so wonderful to see you again, Genevieve,” Mom said as she hugged her.

“You, too, Mrs. Schultz,” Genevieve replied.

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“Call me Harriet ...” Her face lit up as she noticed the ring on Genevieve’s finger. “Or Mom.” She clasped Genevieve’s hand between hers. “Oh, I can’t tell you how happy I am.”

Harriet looked over at Sebastian then and moved to hug him. He held onto her tightly, and she whispered, “I’m overjoyed for you, baby boy. You’re going to be a wonderful husband and father one day.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“So, it’s happening then,” she said quietly as she pulled away.

He nodded, not quite ready to make the announcement he’d confided in his parents about, and Mom gave him a sad smile in reply. He hated making his mother sad, but he knew she was truly happy for him and supported the decision he’d made.

“I hear congratulations are in order,” Dad said, pulling Genevieve into a hug. “Welcome to the family, young lady.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Dinner is ready,” Gerard announced then.

They moved into the dining room just as the doorbell went off, and Gerard ushered Augustus into the room.

“You made it.” Skylar looked pleased.

“Sorry I’m late.”

Sebastian watched Gus as he took his seat, looking better, healthier. He much preferred seeing his brother this way, not dazed and out of it. Gus had been back in Grand Rapids since the regatta, trying to get his life back in order. He wanted to be a part of the company, Sebastian knew he did. But there was still all the mess with Milton to deal with.

Gus gave Genevieve a little wave. “Good to see you again, Genevieve.”

“You, too ... Gus.” She smiled as she said his name, and Sebastian knew it was probably strange for her to say that after thinking he was Sebastian for so long.

When their parents were chatting with Skylar, Gus leaned across the table toward Genevieve. “Sorry for all that stuff this summer,” he told her.

“No worries.” She waved it off. “It all worked out for the best.”

Gus looked from Sebastian to Genevieve and back again. “Yes, it did. Everything’s as it should have been from the start.”

Sebastian took Genevieve’s hand and held it up. “We’re engaged.”

“No way.” Gus’s eyes widened. “Bash, you proposed? That’s ... that’s great. I’m happy for you, bro.” He held his fist out until Sebastian bumped his against it, then stood and came around the table to hug Genevieve.

Sebastian wasn’t sure, but it seemed Gus was less enthusiastic about their engagement than he let on. Maybe he was surprised. They hadn’t talked much lately, so maybe he felt out of the loop.

After dinner, they all moved into the living room again. Mom, Skylar, and Gus sat together on the sofa, Dad took the leather chair by the fireplace, and Sebastian and Genevieve sat together on the loveseat.

Sebastian kissed Genevieve gently on the lips, then stood and walked over to stand by the fireplace.

Everyone gave him their attention.

“By now, you all know that I’ve asked Genevieve to marry me, and she has agreed.” He couldn’t stop smiling. “Before I decided to propose, I spoke to Dad and Mom about a decision I’ve made.”

Genevieve’s eyes narrowed as she watched him curiously.

“Effective immediately, I will be stepping down as president of Schultz Chocolate.”

Skylar gasped. Genevieve’s mouth hung open. Gus looked pleased.

“I will be moving to Montana to be with Genevieve.”

“What?” Genevieve shook her head. “No, you can’t leave your job for me. That’s crazy.”

“I’ve made my decision, darling. I can’t be away from you, and when we marry, I know you’ll want to stay on at the Rescue. You were meant to work there, and I won’t ask you to walk away from it.”

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“But you love your job.” Tears were forming in her eyes.

He sat down next to her on the loveseat and took her hands. “I love you more.”

“Bass.” A tear slipped down her cheek, and he brushed it away with his thumb.

“Who’ll take over your job?” Gus interrupted their sweet moment.

“I’ve left that decision up to Dad.” He nodded at their father then, who stood and took the place where Sebastian had been standing.

Their attention turned to the head of the household.

“I’ve thought long and hard about this decision, and I’ve decided Skylar will move into the position of president in Sebastian’s absence.”

“What?” Gus burst out. “Why? I’m the next oldest. It should be me.”

“Augustus.” Dad gave him a scolding look. “With the issues you’ve had over the past few years and your upcoming court date, I have to think about what will be best for the company at this time.”

“This is crap.” Gus stood and stared his father down. “Nothing I ever do is enough.”

“Gus.” Skylar looked as if her heart was shattering for their brother.

“What do I have to do? Tell me, Dad. Because I’ll do it.”

“You’ll still have your position as vice president for the time being.”

“For the time being? What does that mean?”

“It’s dependent on this law suit.” Dad stepped closer to Gus and lay his hand on his shoulder, looking him straight in the eyes. “I know you want to be taken seriously in this company, and I want that for you. I do. But as I’ve told you before, until we see that you’ve changed ... until you’re ready to settle down and be serious, this is how things are going to be.”

Gus looked devastated, like the weight of the world had suddenly settled on his shoulders. He looked around the room at his family, from face to face, and stopped on Sebastian. “Congratulations on your engagement.” He turned and began walking out of the living room.

“Augustus,” his father called after him.

He turned and locked eyes with their father. “I’ll be going now. It’s obvious where I rank in this family.”

“Gus,” Skylar begged. “Please, don’t.”

“Kick some butt as president, sis.”

And then, with no further arguments or angry scenes, he turned and walked out of the house.

The room was silent for long minutes. Skylar was weeping, and Mom took her into her arms and let her cry. She was so tender when it came to their brother.

“Where will he go?” Genevieve whispered.

“I don’t know. He has the law suit to deal with, so he can’t stay away for long.”

“I feel bad for him.”

Sebastian put his arm around her and leaned back against the loveseat, pulling her into his side. She turned into him, resting her head on his chest, and her palm over his heart.

“I just hope he doesn’t do anything stupid,” Sebastian said.

After some time, when Skylar’s tears had subsided and the sadness of Gus walking out had dulled a little, Mom stood and brushed her hands over her slacks to smooth them out. She looked over at the two of them with a smile.

“What do you say we teach Genevieve how to make Granny’s truffles.”

Genevieve sat up suddenly from her place in Sebastian’s arms, and he immediately felt the loss of her warmth. “Oh, I’d love that.”

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Mom, Dad and Skylar headed toward the kitchen, but Sebastian drew Genevieve into his arms again.

“I wanna make truffles.” She attempted to get up.

Sebastian held her in place and nuzzled her neck instead. “In a minute.”

She giggled as he ran his nose along her neck and tickled her with soft kisses under her ear.

“Come on, lovebirds.” Skylar stood in the living room doorway with her hands on her hips.

As they passed her by, she took hold of Sebastian’s wrist to stop him.

He looked back at her.

“Congratulations.” Tears were in her eyes again. He was sure some of them were leftover from her sadness over Gus.

“Thank you.” He wrapped his sister up in a tight hug. “He’s gonna be okay.” He wasn’t sure his words could reassure her. “I know it.”

“I hope so.”

When Sebastian walked into the kitchen, his mother had already tied an apron around Genevieve and was explaining the whole process to her. He stood back and watched

his future wife, fitting in with his family so well, learning their family recipe, becoming a part of them. It was as if she was meant to be a Schultz, and he truly believed she was.

It struck him then how close he'd come to losing her forever. How his lies could have been the end of their story. But the truth had brought them back together. It was a hard lesson learned. He thought back to what Genevieve had said at the regatta, the cliché her father had always said to her. Honesty is the best policy.

The sick feeling he'd had in his gut every time he made something up to cover the web of lies he'd woven was enough to make him believe in those five words too. It was enough to make him never want to lie to her—or anyone—again. Because this kind, honest, beautiful woman and the love they shared was the greatest truth in his life. And he would never betray that truth again.